
Educational outcomes and behavioural problems among children of incarcerated parents: a systematic review of protective factors

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Background

Current research indicates that incarceration rates have increased substantially (Prison Reform Trust, 2017; Schnittker, Shannon, & McElrath, 2015; Simpson, Guthrie, Lovell, Doyle, & Butler, 2015), including that of women (Kajstura & Immarigeon, 2015; The Sentencing Project, 2015). Therefore, it is likely that a greater number of families and children are being impacted by the incarceration of a family member. While stating that the actual number of children with parental incarceration across the world is not known, Robertson (2012) provides examples of data from a few countries and regions. For example, in the European Union, 800,000 children were reported to be separated from an incarcerated parent on a given day each year, while 17,000 children annually had mothers in prison in the UK (Robertson, 2012). In addition to this, in the year 2015-2016, 5,749,000 children in the US were reported to have had a parent who was incarcerated at some point in the child's life (Kids Count data center, November 2017). In England, although there is no count of children of incarcerated parents, the Government reported in 2015 that 24% to 31% of female offenders had dependent children (Gill & Deegan, 2016). Lack of data on the number of such children indicates their invisibility. Hence, it is not surprising that 'forgotten' (Matthews, 1983) and 'unseen' (Petersilia, 2005) victims, 'orphans of justice' (Shaw, 1992), 'hidden victims' (Bakker, Morris, & Janus, 1978), and 'collateral convicts' (Robertson, 2012) are some of the terms that have been used to refer to children of incarcerated parents and to indicate the concerns about this group.

Challenges/problems of children of incarcerated parents

Research has shown that children of incarcerated parents face several negative impacts across diverse domains. A study in the US that examined the social, health and economic characteristics of non-incarcerated family members of incarcerated individuals, including their children, found that families faced substantial decline in their economic condition while children faced an increase in physical health deterioration, irritability and depression, and academic difficulties, as well as regression to earlier ways of behaving (Arditti, Lambert-Schute, & Joest, 2003). Another study (quantitative) that examined relationship between paternal incarceration and children's grade retention in elementary school found that children of incarcerated fathers were found to be more likely to experience grade retention as compared to other children (Turnkey & Haskins, 2014). However, no significant evidence of variation was found across race/ethnicity, gender, and family structure vis a vis early grade retention as a consequence of paternal incarceration. In this study, propensity scores were calculated to match children with and without paternal incarceration (i.e. treatment and

control groups) in covariates related to child¹ as well as parental² characteristics prior to incarceration, including domestic violence and substance abuse by father, parental impulsivity, as well as cognitive abilities (Turnkey & Haskins, 2014).

Research has also indicated that children of incarcerated parents may be vulnerable to experiencing internalizing as well as externalizing problems. Quantitative research conducted by Hagen, Myers, & Mackintosh (2005) measured the internalizing and externalizing problems experienced by children of incarcerated mothers using the Youth Self Report Scale and found that a significant portion of the sample met the clinical cut off for externalizing as well as internalizing behavioral problems. Further, this study found these results for children were irrespective of their gender. Children of incarcerated parents have also been found to have feelings of alienation due to lack of parental contact (Hedge, 2016).

Several challenges faced by children of prisoners were also reported by a research project across four countries- Germany, Romania, Sweden and the United Kingdom. These challenges included: dealing with shock of parental arrest; dealing with loss of parent; adjusting with the changed financial situation of the family; changed familial roles; coping with ambivalent feelings and stigmatisation; decision making related to the level of secrecy that has to be maintained with the outside world regarding parental incarceration; decision making regarding initiating communication and questions about the incarcerated parent; conflict that may be experienced by children as they consider family's or caregiver's reappraisal of the incarcerated parent (Manby, Jones, Foca, Bieganski, & Starke, 2015). Although there was a significant commonality in the challenges faced by children across the four countries, the contextual differences contributed to various ways in which incarcerated parents were re-appraised by the families.

Another study found higher levels of problem behaviors and serious delinquency during adolescence in the group with a history of parental incarceration during childhood (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011). This group was also more likely to be exposed to parenting and family risks, and the parents in families with a history of incarceration were using inconsistent and inappropriate parenting strategies. These findings are from a quantitative retrospective study that looked at the association between parental incarceration and youth problem behavior across adolescents with a comparison group of adolescents without a history of parental incarceration during childhood³. The research proposes the assumption that such an increase in the problem behaviors across time can be an indication of decreasing influence of childhood protective factors (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011).

¹Such as: race, gender, low birth weight, fair or poor health, and age

²These included demographic, socio-economic and health characteristics

³The study was trying to find out the effects of parental incarceration across four key domains: family social advantage, parent health, parenting strategies, and child problem behaviors and serious youth delinquency. The sample was drawn from a longitudinal data set and included youth in the age of group of 20 to 25 years.

Protective factors

Even while there is research to suggest that children of incarcerated parents are at risk of low academic performance as well as behavioural problems, evidence needs to be synthesised on factors that may be related to these impacts. A previous literature review conducted by La Vigne, Davies, & Brazzell (2008) describes the following as protective factors that buffer children of incarcerated parents from behavioural and academic problems: parent-child relationship before incarceration; maintenance of children's contact with their incarcerated parent and the availability of social support (support from family, caregivers, and members of the community, especially in the form of a close, positive relationship with an adult caregiver; support from outside of the home, particularly through mentoring programs; and having individuals around them who neither stigmatize nor ignore the imprisonment of the child's parent).

Previous qualitative research in Hong Kong (Chui, 2010) found that social support is used by families in order to cope with the impact of incarceration. Luther (2015), in her exploratory qualitative study in the USA, examined how social support from various caring adults (caregivers, grandparents, siblings, teachers and others) contributed to resilience in the lives of adults who had experienced parental incarceration in childhood. Findings from this study indicate the buffering effect of social support for children of incarcerated parents as the caring adults helped them through processes such as supporting children's vision of a better life (for example, towards academic achievement), engaging children in conventional activities such as sports, and encouraging turning points by shifting lives of children from risky behaviours to potentially positive aspects.

Primary research has also examined the protective role played by hope in mediating the internalizing and externalizing behavioural problems experienced by children of incarcerated parents. A quantitative primary study found hope to be significantly inversely associated with internalizing as well as externalizing behaviour problems (Hagen, Myers, & Mackintosh, 2005). The study also found social support to be positively linked with the hopefulness experienced by children and conceptualized social support as an external protective factor that contributes to the intrapersonal protective factor of hope. A qualitative study which aimed to examine the challenges of experiencing parental incarceration, as well as resiliency of children in their own words, also found social support, as well as access to resources, to be important in helping children cope with parental incarceration (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008)⁴.

Studies have also emphasized the positive impact of stable care-giving arrangements on children of incarcerated parents (Poehlmann, 2005; Allard, 2012), with respect to a range of outcomes. Further, the quality of care-giving available to children in the absence of the incarcerated parent has been mentioned to be an important determinant of their coping

⁴For example, the study found that church and faith aided children's coping by helping children make meaning of their struggle. Further, the study also found that individual factors such as the ability to express their emotions through healthy avenues such as theatre or such creative coping strategies played an important role in resilience. In this study, resilience was perceived as doing well academically or not engaging in delinquent behaviour.

(Petsch & Rochlen, 2009). A study conducted by Markson, Lamb, & Löselin (2016) looked at contextual family risks and the role of protective family functioning on behavioural outcomes of children of incarcerated fathers. This quantitative correlation study examined how the cumulative family risks (e.g. poverty, parental mental health problems) predicted behavioural outcomes in children of incarcerated fathers and further examined whether potential protective aspects of family functioning (support, shared responsibility and close mother-child relationships) moderated the impact of these risk factors. The presence of positive family relationships appeared to provide a protective effect in diminishing the negative impact of risks on the behavioural outcomes in children. However, the findings also revealed there were no protective effects at the presence of high levels of cumulative risks.

Parent-child closeness as a protective factor was studied by Davis & Shlafer (2017), while investigating the relationship between risk (race, poverty and family structure) and protective factors in the mental health of adolescents with currently and formerly incarcerated parents. This quantitative survey research included 122,180 children studying in eighth, ninth, and eleventh grade. Data for this study were drawn from the Minnesota Student Survey (MSS 2013) which is a state-wide data set managed for the surveillance of health-related behaviours. The study examined indicators of compromised mental health in children of currently and formerly incarcerated parents as compared to children with no history of parental incarceration. Mental health indicators used in this study are internalizing problems, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, self-injurious behaviour, diagnosis of mental, emotional, or behavioural problems, and treatment of mental health concerns. The results show that children of currently and formerly incarcerated parents were different from children with no history of incarceration, on both demographic characteristics (gender, race/ethnicity, experience of poverty, family structure and parental closeness) and mental health indicators. Further, children of currently incarcerated parents are at higher risk for poor mental health outcomes compared to children of formerly incarcerated parents. With respect to the parent-child relationships, the findings were similar to that of the study of Markson et al., (2016) showing that adolescent mental health is moderated by parental closeness in adolescents of currently and formerly incarcerated parents. However, the protective effect of a strong parent-child relationship appears weakest for children in the context of higher risks.

A study on 69 children (aged 6 to 12 years) whose mothers were incarcerated and 25 of their kinship caregivers attempted to examine whether perceived levels of warmth and acceptance by caregivers were related to assessments of children's behaviours. The research found a strong three-way relationship between caregivers' level of parenting stress, the children's level of externalising behaviours, and caregivers' ability to behave in a warm and accepting manner towards the children in care. However, the causal path is unclear wherein it is difficult to establish which the initiating problem was. A clear relationship was found between the duration of care-giving and warmth and acceptance towards the children. Caregivers who had been with the children for the entire duration of incarceration reported more warmth and acceptance towards children in their care as compared to those who took on the care of the children after someone else had had them for a while (Mackintosh, Myers & Kennon, 2006).

Various protective factors may interact with each other to enhance positive outcomes in children of incarcerated parents. In a study (Smokowski, Reynolds, & Bezruczko, 1999) which was aimed at examining resilience, defined in terms of academic performance, in 86 children from the Chicago inner city area (drawn from the Chicago Longitudinal Study database) living in high risk conditions, including parental incarceration, it was found that there was an interplay between individual traits and social support in the form of familial ties, as well as external systems of support, in playing an important role in helping the children survive and even thrive despite adverse circumstances.

Research is not very conclusive on whether parent-child contact through visitation works as a protective factor. Studies have also indicated that children are often reluctant to visit their parents in prisons. This has been mentioned by Hairston (2007) in the review of present literature. Visitation can be a traumatic experience for children, who are exposed to unfriendly staff and a restrictive prison environment (Arditti, 2012; Smith, 2014; Chui, 2010). Chui (2010) found this to be present in the context of Hong Kong, Smith (2014) describes this as one of the challenges faced by children of incarcerated parents across different contexts (Northern Ireland, Denmark, Italy and Poland), and Arditti (2012) has mentioned the same in her review of literature on child trauma in the context of parental incarceration. These findings relating to contact between children and their incarcerated parents necessitates investigation of evidence related to parental contact as a protective factor.

The proposed review

The proposed review focuses on assessing evidence related to various protective factors that influence child outcomes in terms of education and behavioural problems. Considering that contextual vulnerabilities, risks and resources for families and children of incarcerated parents may vary across high-income countries (HICs) and low and middle-income countries (LMICs), the review will attempt to examine how protective factors vary in HICs in comparison with LMICs, contingent upon the comparability of studies in HICs and LMICs. This would contribute towards creating evidence that could influence policy and intervention level initiatives in the context of children of incarcerated parents.

Objectives

The review will aim to answer the following questions:

- What are the protective factors related to educational outcomes and behavioural problems among children of incarcerated parents?
- How are protective factors related to educational outcomes and behavioural problems among children of incarcerated parents different in HICs as compared to LMICs?

Existing reviews

Systematic reviews related to children of incarcerated parents are limited.

A search of existing and in-progress systematic reviews on PROSPERO, Cochrane Library, Campbell Collaboration and Google Scholar using the search terms 'incarcerated', 'prisoners', 'children of incarcerated' brought up the following results which are most relevant to the topic proposed:

1. Murray, J., Farrington, D. P., Sekol, I., & Olsen, R. F. (2009). Effects of parental imprisonment on child antisocial behavior and mental health: A systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 4, 1-105.
2. Murray, J., Farrington, D.P. & Sekol, I. (2012). Children's Antisocial Behavior, Mental Health, Drug Use, and Educational Performance After Parental Incarceration: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 138 (2), 175-210.

The 2009 review by Murray et al. included 16 studies (from 1960 to 2008) with the following 3 aims:

- To assess evidence on parental imprisonment as a predictor of child antisocial behavior (including criminal behavior) and poor mental health.
- To assess evidence on the possible causal effects of parental imprisonment on these outcomes.
- To investigate whether characteristics of children, parents, prisons, and wider social and penal settings might moderate the effects of parental imprisonment on children.

The 2012 review by Murray et al. included 40 studies (until February 2011) with the aim of assessing evidence on the following questions:

- To what extent is parental incarceration associated with children's later antisocial behaviour, mental health problems, drug use, and poor educational performance?
- Do these associations vary across different types of samples (children in the community, compared with children in clinics and courts)?
- Does parental incarceration predict worse outcomes for children than other forms of parent-child separation?
- Do results vary according to a study's methodological characteristics?

Difference between the proposed review and previous two reviews:

The scope of the proposed review is different as it specifically aims to assess evidence related to protective factors that influence educational outcomes and behavioural problems. The moderators investigated by the previous reviews include: sex of the child, age of child at the time of incarceration, maternal or paternal incarceration. The third objective of the 2009 review wanted to look at a number of characteristics which may moderate the effect of imprisonment, but they were only able to look at a limited number as there were not enough studies focused on the same. The authors of the 2009 review had recommended further research investigating moderators and mediators of the effects of parental incarceration on children. Further, the previous systematic reviews have primarily looked at the quantitative

studies. However, the proposed review will assess evidence for all protective factors that may have been studied in quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods studies. Examples of these protective factors include: parent-child contact (presence, method, frequency); social support for family and children; type of care-giving arrangement for children post-incarceration; consistency in care-giving arrangement of children post-incarceration; and quality of caregiver-child relationship after parental incarceration.

In addition to this, unlike the proposed review, both previous systematic reviews have focused more on evidence of the association between parental incarceration with children's later antisocial behaviour, mental health problems, drug use, and poor educational performance.

In both the previous reviews, 'antisocial behaviours' were defined and included as a wide variety of behaviours that violate societal norms or laws. This included externalizing behaviour that does not necessarily involve crime, for example, persistent lying and deceit, as well as criminal behaviour. The proposed review, on the other hand, defines 'behavioural problems' in terms of substance use, i.e. alcohol and drug use; aggression, and engagement in crime/criminal offences/activities that are considered in conflict with law. These behavioural problems are just illustrative in nature and depending upon whether studies have specifically looked at protective factors in the context of each of these problems or as a composite variable, this definition may undergo a change.

The 2009 review did not examine substance abuse if no other antisocial or mental health problems were reported. In the 2012 review 'drug use' was included in terms of illicit drugs. Studies that only measured alcohol or tobacco use were not included, but studies that used combined measures of illicit drug use and other forms of substance use were included.

Regarding educational outcomes, while 2009 review did not focus on it, the 2012 review included 'educational performance' in terms of school grades, and teachers', parents', and children's ratings of children's academic performance. The review included results from studies that used standardized tests of children's cognitive ability, as well as studies using school performance test scores. The proposed review, however, will look at educational outcomes in terms of included aspects studied in present literature. These may include (but are not limited to) regularity of attending school, completion of schooling, and school grades.

Other related systematic reviews:

The search for systematic reviews also brought up following results, which are marginally relevant to the topic proposed but not similar to the review being proposed.

1. Parenting programmes for incarcerated parents. By Katrina McLaughlin, Geraldine Macdonald, Nuala Livingstone and Martin Dempster. This systematic review is in progress and the protocol was published in the Cochrane Library in September 2016.
2. Parenting programmes for reducing negative outcomes for incarcerated fathers and their families. By Daragh Bradshaw, Katrina McLaughlin & Orla Muldoon. Located within the Campbell Collaboration's Crime and Justice Coordinating Group, this

systematic review is in progress and the title was published in the Campbell Library on 2017-04-24.

3. Eleanor Armstrong, Sharon Dawe. Parenting interventions for incarcerated parents: A systematic review and meta-analysis. This systematic review was registered with PROSPERO on 29 June 2015 and is now complete.

Population

Children [male and female, 0-18 years old] whose parents [biological, adoptive, step-parents, currently alive or dead] are/were incarcerated at present or in the past.

Parental incarceration refers to any form of custodial confinement of a parent by the criminal justice system, except being held overnight in cells. This is similar to the definition used by Murray and Farrington in their systematic review titled “Effects of parental imprisonment on child antisocial behavior and mental health: A systematic review” (2009).

Comparison: This review will include studies that may or may not contain a comparison group of children without parental incarceration.

Outcomes/Protective factors

The outcomes included in the scope of this review are defined as follows:

Educational outcomes: This outcome will include aspects studied in present literature. These may include (but are not limited to):

- a) Regularity of attending school
- b) Completion of schooling
- c) School grades.

Behavioural problems: This outcome will include all behavioural problems included in primary studies. These may include (but are not limited to) internalizing and externalizing behaviours.

Studies focusing on protective factors at following levels vis a vis educational outcomes and behavioural problems will be included in this review:

- a) Family level factors including parent-child relationship, stability of care-giving, quality of care-giving
- b) Societal factors including school support, neighbourhood support
- c) State level factors including social protection and legislative framework

Protective factors are conditions or attributes in individuals, families, communities, or the larger society that, when present, mitigate or eliminate risk in families and communities that, when present, increase the health and well-being of children and families (Children's Bureau, 2017).

Study designs

We will include qualitative studies as well as quantitative studies (including correlational, retrospective, prospective, with or without comparison group) that focus on protective factors associated with educational outcomes, and behavioural problems among children of incarcerated parents.

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Potential conflicts of interest

The lead author and co-authors have not yet completed the primary research on the topic as part of the ICMR funding. They also do not have any prior published reviews on the topic. None of the members of the author team are holding administrative/advisory/official roles where they are involved in decision making directly or indirectly concerning children of incarcerated parents.

Preliminary timeframe

- Date you plan to submit a draft protocol: **30 June 2018**
- Date you plan to submit a draft review: **28 February 2019**