

Campbell Crime and Justice Group Title Registration Form

1. Title of the review

Parental imprisonment: A systematic review of its effects on children's antisocial behavior, crime, and mental health problems

2. Background and objective of this review (briefly describe the problem and the intervention).

Recent research shows that parental imprisonment is associated with antisocial behavior, crime, and mental health problems for children (e.g. Murray & Farrington, 2005, forthcoming; Murray, Janson, & Farrington, 2007). Two questions arise: What is the average strength of this association across existing studies? Is there any evidence for a causal effect of parental imprisonment on children?

Narrative reviews of research on children of prisoners do not refer to any randomized experiments on the effects of parental imprisonment on children (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Johnston, 1995; Murray, 2005; Murray & Farrington, submitted). Thus, it is likely that extant research on the effects of parental imprisonment has low internal validity. Observational research can, however, tell us about how strongly parental imprisonment is associated with future adverse child outcomes. Also, research using appropriate controls can provide some relevant evidence on whether parental imprisonment might cause adverse outcomes for children (but with lower internal validity than experimental research).

The proposed systematic review will first examine how strongly parental imprisonment is associated with adverse child outcomes, and then assess what is known about the possible causal effects of parental imprisonment on children.

Establishing what is known to date on these topics will generate hypotheses for future research using experimental and quasi-experimental designs.

3. Define the population

The “intervention population” = children whose parents are imprisoned between the child’s birth and 18th birthday.

The comparison population = children whose parents have never been imprisoned (sometimes matched on relevant variables to test causal hypotheses).

4. Define the intervention

In this review, imprisonment (whether in jails or prisons) will be regarded as a social intervention – with possible unintended consequences for children of prisoners.

(Approximately 1.5 million children under 18 had an imprisoned parent in the U.S. in 1999 (Mumola, 2000).)

5. Outcome(s) (what is aimed to accomplish – Primary and secondary outcomes should all be mentioned)

Two child outcomes will be assessed in the review: antisocial-delinquent behavior and mental health problems (mainly depression and anxiety). These outcomes will be considered in both the short and long term (i.e. both in the months immediately following parental imprisonment, and in adult life).

6. Methodology (What types of studies are to be included or excluded and what will be your method of synthesis? Will you use meta-analysis?)

The review will be conducted in two stages. The first stage will be a review of evidence on the strength of association between parental imprisonment and adverse child outcomes. For this stage, three criteria will be set for inclusion of studies in the review:

1. Control Group: The study must include children of prisoners and at least one group of children without imprisoned parents.
2. Measure of outcome: The study must use a consistent measure of the child outcome. The same measure should be used for children of prisoners and for controls.

3. Numeric information: Effect sizes must be reported, or enough numerical information to calculate effect sizes.

A methodological quality scale for risk-factor research is being developed by the lead reviewers. Using this scale, studies meeting the above criteria will be assessed for construct validity, statistical conclusion validity, and external validity. Results will be synthesized using meta-analysis (Lipsey & Wilson, 2001). Results from the highest quality studies will be synthesized separately. Where applicable, regression methods will be used to investigate independent predictors of effect sizes. Predictors that might be investigated are: children's ages, child exposure to maternal vs. paternal imprisonment, and country of residence.

The second stage of the review will assess the evidence on whether parental imprisonment might cause adverse outcomes for children. Further criteria will be used to select studies from the first stage of the review for inclusion in the second stage.

We expect that no experimental studies will be found on the effects of parental imprisonment on children. In order to summarize what (little) is known about the causal effects of parental imprisonment on children, relevant non-experimental and quasi-experimental research will be synthesized. Criteria for selecting research for this stage of the review will be refined, but we expect that the criteria will include:

1. Studies using a matched-control design to establish whether associations between parental imprisonment and adverse child outcomes exist independently of possible confounds, such as: parental criminality, family poverty, poor child-rearing methods, and parental mental illness.
2. Studies using statistical controls to establish whether associations between parental imprisonment and adverse child outcomes exist after controlling for possible confounds, such as: parental criminality, family poverty, poor child-rearing methods, and parental mental illness.

7. Do you need support in any of these areas (methodology, statistics, systematic searches, field expertise, review manager etc?)

No support is needed, but comments from Campbell Groups would be appreciated.

8. Lead reviewer(s) with contact information

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