

The Effects of Parental Incarceration On Adolescent Development

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An unexpectedly high number of youth have either a biological mother or father incarcerated in state or federal prison. This horrific fact concerning the United States jail system not only affects these children as young adults, but will continue to impact them all the way through adulthood as they begin to take on roles in society. The effects of parental incarceration on adolescent development is a subject heavily reviewed by various researchers, but has yet to reach a uniform consensus. However, one conclusion all articles tend to agree on is that parental incarceration impacts the child negatively one way or another. Children of incarcerated parents are expected to experience more adverse outcomes in their lifetime compared to the average child, and the 10 articles analyzed in this literature review explain a variety of reasons for this correlation. Most articles find it to be the result of a spurious relationship, where the correlation is affected by an outside variable, that makes negative life experiences and parental incarceration so strongly associated with each other. The significance of this topic is so that more will be known about the potential risks for children of incarcerated parents. This issue is especially relevant today as incarceration is continuously increasing and more children of parents behind bars are having to deal with damaging effects to their development. The unfortunate truth is that punishments that are meant for adults are indirectly affecting children who have no control over the situation. This literature review will explore the specific consequences for children whose parents are incarcerated and how this experience affects their mental, physical, and social health.

Many articles point out that parental incarceration is just one of the many aspects that contribute to the developmental problems for these children. There are numerous other external factors that cause incarceration to be more likely among families. In reality, the incarceration of a

family member is unlikely to prompt the beginning of struggles for a child and family. “Rather, it is often a continuation or exacerbation of an already challenging situation in lives marked by little education, poverty, unstable home life, substance abuse difficulties, mental health problems, abuse, trauma, and community violence” (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011). These factors are all predictors that a child will exhibit developmental problems and show delinquent behavior in the future. The majority of parents incarcerated have a high school diploma or less, which affects the kind of job they are able to get, and brings financial pressure on the family. Money stress can lead to poor parenting quality, and the never ending cycle of adverse outcomes for these children continue. Given the data available, parental incarceration does not appear to cause developmental problems among adolescents, but it is a combination of external components that accompany incarceration and affect a family’s overall well-being (Eddy & Reid, 2003).

Mental Health:

Whether issues arise from parental incarceration itself or other disadvantages in the family, studies confirm that children affected by parental incarceration experience some sort of mental health decline. Emotional problems are ranked higher for children with at least one parent who has been incarcerated than children in the general population. One study was trying to determine whether youth who experienced parental incarceration differed from other youth receiving mental health services. One demographic finding was that African Americans were more prevalent than any other group of adolescents to have a parent incarcerated. The study found that compared to other youth receiving treatment, adolescents whose parents had been incarcerated had significantly higher rates of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, but

shockingly lower rates of major depression (Lee, Fang, & Luo). While this may be due to a generally lower prevalence of depression among youth who experience parental incarceration, it might also be due to a decreased selection of these children because they were not showing aggressive signs of “acting out” and therefore were not put into treatment.

Another study investigating the relationship between parental incarceration and adolescent mental health found that those who reported paternal incarceration had increased odds for three mental health problems including depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder, while those who experienced maternal incarceration only had increased odds for depression (Roettger, Swisher, Kuhl, & Chavez, 2010). Also, larger associations were found for children to experience mental health issues more than physical health issues. Nonetheless, parental incarceration greatly affects both areas of development especially during adolescents.

In one final meta-analysis, the researchers concluded that there are zero or weak associations between parental incarceration and children’s poor mental health, drug use, and educational performance. However, these children are at a significantly higher risk to exhibit antisocial behavior compared to their other peers (Mears & Siennick, 2015). While this article’s findings contrast the information presented in the previous articles, it helps prove the point that mental health among adolescents is subjective to each child and their experience with parental incarceration as well as numerous other family-life factors that pose a threat to their development.

Physical Health:

While most research on the effects of parental incarceration is associated with mental health, there have been some significant studies done to understand the relationship between parental incarceration and physical health. One particular study used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to examine whether parental incarceration is linked to increased body mass index among women. For each of the four waves of the study, parental incarceration was positively associated with higher BMI. The study concluded that body mass index for women who have experienced parental incarceration is actually .49 units higher than for women whose parents have never been incarcerated. This finding is important as it “suggest[s] a stress internalization process that, for the first time, links parental incarceration with obesity among women” (Roettger & Boardman, 2012). Some research suggests that the poor physical health behavior could be a substitute for mental health issues such as depression or acting out. The authors of the study point out that these results are especially important for African American women, as at least one-fourth of African American children are raised in homes where one of their parents has spent time in prison, and the BMI for African American women is already higher than non-Hispanic white women.

Another study wanted to determine the relationship between parental incarceration and children’s overall health. Children of incarcerated parents are a vulnerable population in general who experience many mental and physical health disadvantages; however, much more research is done to examine the mental health limitations rather than physical health. This study uses the

stress process paradigm to evaluate children's health by identifying parental incarceration as a form of stress experienced by the parents which proliferates onto the children. This theory suggests that people of social disadvantage experience stressors which negatively affect their health. Given that children who are minorities, in low socioeconomic households, or have parents with little education are most likely already experiencing stress, parental incarceration further promotes health disparities between social classes in the United States. Children are feeling the stress of their parents which carries with them into their adult lives. Constant stress is detrimental to mental as well as physical health. Physical health issues found to be associated with parental incarceration include high cholesterol, asthma, migraines, HIV/AIDS, as well as higher BMI among females (Phillips, Burns, Wagner, Kramer, & Robbins, 2002).

Social Health:

Possibly worse than the adverse mental and physical health effects are the behavioral problems exhibited by adolescents of incarcerated parents. Most findings suggest that these children are exposed to more risks across their lifetime than the average child, and will demonstrate abnormal social problems during adolescence. The lack of proper family functioning and parenting causes these youth to adjust poorly in new situations. One meta-analysis hypothesizes that parental incarceration predicts antisocial behavior, but not mental health, drug use, or poor educational performance (Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012). A possible link between antisocial behavior and parental incarceration is children seeing their parents respond rebelliously to stressful situations. Another possible explanation for the association is the stigma of parental incarceration- with peers, teachers, and other community

members thinking that the child will end up a criminal like their parents. Of course, antisocial behavior can also be the result of other external factors mentioned before that accompany parental incarceration such as low socioeconomic status, parental health, and education.

One study examined behavioral differences by gender, and concluded that adolescents whose parents are incarcerated are overall more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors, such as bullying, rather than internalizing behaviors, such as social withdrawal. However, boys were significantly more likely to demonstrate externalizing behaviors while girls were significantly more likely to demonstrate internalizing behaviors. Another finding had to do with paternal arrest vs. paternal imprisonment. For boys at age 14, paternal arrest was significantly associated with increased risk for alcohol and tobacco use, however there was no relationship between alcohol and tobacco use and paternal imprisonment. The exact opposite was true for girls at age 14 who were significantly more likely to use tobacco or alcohol if their father was imprisoned but not arrested (Kinner, Alati, Najman, & Williams, 2007).

Another study hypothesized that parental incarceration predicted boys' antisocial and delinquent behavior partly because of the distress of separation, partly because they viewed their parents as criminals, and partly because of other childhood risks associated with parental imprisonment (Murray & Farrington, 2005). Results concluded that separation from parents when children are young is the main reason why adolescents whose parents are imprisoned suffer from antisocial behavior. This finding is notable as boys separated because of parental incarceration had more antisocial/delinquent outcomes than boys separated from their parents by hospitalization or death. Also, boys who were separated because of parental imprisonment had

more adverse effects than boys whose parents had been to prison before they were born. This suggests that separation of a young boy from his parents is likely to lead to antisocial and delinquent behaviors during adolescents.

Conclusion:

Ultimately, parental incarceration affects the mental, physical, and social health of adolescents and poses a threat to their development. While it is unlikely that parental incarceration directly affects these three concepts, there are numerous other factors that have to do with the lifestyle of these youth that make them more susceptible to experience declines in their mental, physical, and social health. From the research, it appears that most studies find that there is a strong correlation between adolescents who experience parental incarceration and antisocial behavior, with a lesser extent mental problems and educational performance, and an even lesser extent physical health issues. As far as physical health, however, more than one study found there to be an association between parental incarceration and increased body mass index among females. A possible explanation for this could be that these girls are using poor physical health habits as a substitute for other externalizing behavior. This theory goes along with an article that explored antisocial behavior by gender and found that females are more likely to exhibit internalizing behavior such as feeling sad and not wanting to interact with people rather than externalizing behavior. If females are presumed not to reach out for help, they are keeping their problems inside them which can lead to unhealthy habits like overeating- a physical health problem that could potentially turn into a mental health issue such as an eating disorder. Unfortunately, one correlation found to be true for both males and females who experience

parental incarceration is the use of tobacco and alcohol at a young age. Substance abuse reflects poor mental, physical, and social health among adolescents and negatively affects all three realms of development. This point leads to the fact that mental, physical, and social health are all intertwined and influence each other. Among all 10 articles analyzed in this review, parental incarceration is correlated with negative outcomes for adolescents and greater effort is needed to help these youth mentally, physically, and especially socially.

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