HIDDEN COSTS OF MASS INCARCERATION: CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS

Jane Siegel – Rutgers University-Camden
Youth Violence Prevention Conference – April 9, 2015
Number of People in Prison and Jail, 1910-2013

Data from The Punishing Decade (Justice Policy Institute, 2000), the Sourcebook of Justice Statistics & Correctional Populations in US, 2012 (BJS)
How many?

- 1.1 million men and 120,000 women in prison have at least 1 minor child
  - 22% children whose parent in prison age 4 or younger

- Estimated 2.7 million children had parent in prison in 2008
  - 1 in 28 children, or 3.6% of child population

- > 11 million have experienced parental incarceration
  - Estimated 15% of children have had father in prison or jail
Children of incarcerated parents, by race

Parent's criminal behavior

- Arrest
- Jail
- Trial
- Prison
- Release and Return
When a parent goes to prison...

- Disruption to family structure
- Disruption in parent-child relationship
- Loss of income
- Stress in (new) household
- Stigma
Far, far away...

Children of incarcerated parents in Oklahoma. Green = child’s location, red = parent in prison
Effects of parental incarceration

- Mental health
- Behavioral
- Academic
- Physical health
- Economic
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<th>Children of:</th>
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<td>Prisoners</td>
<td>Substance-abusers</td>
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Disentangling the effects of parental incarceration from other risk factors is difficult.
### Factors affecting children’s outcomes

#### Pre-Incarceration
- **Demographics**
  - Age
  - Gender
  - Socioeconomic status
  - Race/ethnicity

- **Family**
  - Parental absence
  - Potential guardian present
  - Siblings
  - Quality of parent-child relationship

- **Community level**
  - Crime
  - Violence
  - High incarceration rates
  - Schools
  - Health care

- **Exposure to violence**
  - Child abuse victim
  - Witness violence at home
  - Community violence

- **Parental risk factors**
  - Criminal behavior
  - Substance abuse
  - Mental health
  - Stress

- **Prior separations**
  - Incarceration
  - Divorce/separation
  - Hospitalization

#### During Incarceration
- **Community level**
  - Crime
  - Violence
  - High incarceration rates
  - Schools
  - Health care

- **Living Arrangements**
  - Relationship to caregiver
  - Prior relationship w/ caregiver
  - Sibling placement
  - Economic situation

- **External supports**
  - Extended family
  - Friends
  - Community
  - School
  - Clergy

- **Parent-child contact**
  - Visits
  - Calls
  - Letters
  - Duration of incarc.
  - Distance
  - Frequency
  - Stigma
Incarcerated parents’ characteristics

Parental incarceration is certainly a risk marker
I was high, sitting on the toilet, nodding out. John (her boyfriend) came in and told me to move. I couldn’t, so we started fighting. I picked up a frying pan and a glass. I hit him with both of them, anything else I could find. I stomped him in the mouth. John called the cops, told them I had a knife. They came and they was looking for a weapon. The cops said “she’s fucked up” and took me out in my bra. I was fighting them, telling them ‘take him, take him,’ but they handcuffed me.
Emerging theme: trauma and toxic stress

- Exposure to repeated stressors *without* supportive adult to buffer
  - Activates prolonged stress response
    - Can alter brain chemistry

- Can lead to lifelong problems in mental and physical health, problems in learning and behavior
Toxic stress

- Precipitants include:
  - “extreme poverty in conjunction with continuous family chaos,
  - severe and enduring maternal depression,
  - persistent parental substance abuse, or
  - repeated exposure to violence in the community or within the family”

- “The essential feature of toxic stress is the absence of consistent, supportive relationships to help the child cope”

Implications/Recommendations

- **Support for children:**
  - Help them maintain contact with parent
    - Visits, affordable phone calls
    - Furloughs
  - Help them deal with emotional issues

- **Support for parents**
  - Meaningful treatment and post-release support
    - Financial support

- **Support for caregivers**

- **Listen to the families!**
Implications/Recommendations

- Increased awareness among law enforcement
  - Explicit policies when children present at arrest
- Sentencing reform
- Alternatives to prison
  - Community-based facilities and programs
Resources

- National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated at Rutgers-Camden
  - [https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/](https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/)
  - nrccfi@camden.rutgers.edu
  - Director: Ann Adalist-Estrin
“What the best and wisest parent wants for his child, that must we want for all the children of the community. Anything less is unlovely, and left unchecked, destroys our democracy.”

-John Dewey