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### Impacts of Parental Incarceration on Child's Well-Being and Interventions to Support Them

Anna Stacey Roberge

University of New Hampshire - Main Campus

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PARENTAL INCARCERATION AND CHILD WELL-BEING

Impacts of Parental Incarceration on Child's Well-Being and Interventions to Support Them

Anna S. Roberge

University of New Hampshire

Undergraduate Honors Thesis Advisor

Kimberly Turner Nesbitt, Ph.D.

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### **Abstract**

This study reviews the effectiveness and impact of current interventions for children who have incarcerated parents in New Hampshire. The negative impacts of parental incarceration have led to the need for these intervention strategies. Recently psychologists and behavioral experts have conducted their studies which show that children who have incarcerated parents are more likely to display delinquent behaviors. Additionally, studies have shown that parental incarceration can lead to the experiencing of several more psychological difficulties, such as depression, anxiety, and learning disorders (Kremer et al., 2020). Several communities have worked to implement interventions that will help these children avoid falling into the path of delinquent behavior. In order to look at these interventions this study reviews several other studies regarding intervention strategies as well as conducting two different interviews that further the development of different intervention strategies. The interviews were conducted with the Family Connections Center and NH Children's Trust. All this data was reviewed to determine some of the most effective intervention strategies for these children and what impact the strategies have on their future lives.

## **Impacts of Parental Incarceration on Child's Well-Being and Interventions to Support Them**

Parental incarceration has become increasingly common now about 3 million children in the United States under the age of 18 currently have a parent in prison (Bernstein et al., 2015). Additionally, several others are living their adult lives with the past trauma of having a parent incarcerated. The increase in parental incarceration rates has led to the destabilization of families (Glaze et al., 2023). The increasingly detrimental effects that parental incarceration can have on children have become a major topic among several researchers, this can include impacting the child's mental and physical well-being, financial hardship, poor academic performance, major depressive disorder, anxiety, and delinquent behavior (Peterson et al, 2015). In particular, the increased level of juvenile delinquency among children who have parents incarcerated has been a focus for intervention to help prevent children from engaging in illegal and unsafe behaviors. It is important to understand the effectiveness of interventions for children of incarcerated parents to help these children have positive lifelong outcomes.

To understand the importance of implementing interventions for children of incarcerated parents, experiments and correlational research studies have been conducted to examine the impact of parental incarceration. It is important to first look at how research determines the level of detriment by looking at their definition of trauma. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration defines trauma as, "resulting from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (La Vigne et al., 2008). This definition is utilized throughout this review and the research summarized is focused on this definition.

La Vigne and colleagues' research (2008) has demonstrated potential negative outcomes children of incarcerated parents are more likely to experience compared to their peers with non-incarcerated parents. One of the outcomes that was deemed most impactful to these children is the loss of their primary caregivers. Additionally, if visitations are not feasible, the child can lose complete contact with their primary caregiver. If this occurs at an extremely young age, while the children are still learning to develop attachments, the bonds that they are able to maintain later in their lives are negatively impacted which could lead to anti-social and illegal behaviors, (Eddy et al., 2013).

Vigne et al. (2008) have also identified that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to experience violence than their peers without incarcerated parents, which can negatively impact brain development. Even more challenging, these children are also more likely to have experienced drug and alcohol exposure which could lead to higher usage of these substances while navigating traumatic events (La Vigne et al., 2008). Parental involvement in the criminal justice system has also been found to put children at risk for instability, financial hardship, mental health problems, poor academic performance, anti-social behaviors, and delinquent behaviors (Peterson et al., 2015).

Youth depression, attachment difficulties, and aggression associated with parental incarceration are high-risk factors for predicting engagement in delinquency activity (Miller, 2006). For example, Kremer and colleagues (2020) found children of incarcerated parents are at a higher risk for hyperactivity and disruptive behaviors, which are displayed by about 20% of the children, and aggression, which is displayed by about 7% of the children, which are associated with later delinquency. It is theorized that children tend to internalize feelings of embarrassment, confusion, and anger causing increasing levels of loneliness, sadness, and abandonment which

causes them to look for a way out, often being illegal behaviors (Kremer et al., 2020). This is supported by the finding that antisocial behavior is one of the largest consequences of having a parent incarcerated, which can, in turn, lead to conduct disorders (Will et al., 2014).

Collectively the data on the potential negative effects of parental incarceration on children leads to the important conclusion that children should not be punished for their parent's mistakes, (La Vigne et al., 2008). As such, it is of great importance to find ways to reduce the negative impact and help these children navigate their parent's incarceration, especially to reduce juvenile delinquency rates. One key protective factor is mentorship to help with the child's social-emotional development which becomes disrupted when a parent is taken away (Glaze, 2023). What this means is that while creating interventions to support children of incarcerated parents, it is important to provide the children with a mentor figure.

Prior research on strategies to support children of incarcerated parents has shown that trauma-informed approaches to interventions are a vital component (La Vigne et al., 2008). When working with children who have experienced traumatic events, like parental incarceration, it is important to be sensitive to their trauma to not cause retraumatization. Trauma-focused therapy allows for the children to have their needs to be directly addressed while also focusing on being sensitive to the child's trauma. In their review of intervention strategies, Peterson and colleagues (2015) found that successful programs included the common elements of identifying goals, ensuring the process is collaborative, determining which components should be in the program, and that implementation of the program goals should be to strengthen the parent-child bond, ensure the interactions are beneficial, allow for individuals to make parenting decisions, and use evidence found in research such as this. These factors are also identified by other works in this area(e.g. Kremer et al., 2020; Miller, 2006).

A key point that has been identified to support children of incarcerated parents is to address the child's mental health (Miller, 2006). Additionally, it has been found that children should be assessed individually to identify needs instead of as one large group (Kremer et al., 2020). This is because when working in a group setting, not every kid may have their needs met as all children respond differently. This means that interventions can be most effective when they specialize the needs of each child individually, therefore allowing them to assess the child's direct needs.

There are certain, additional, characteristics that a program should have to be most effective. Charles et al. (2021), found four characteristics that were most helpful when developing a program. The use of visit coaching, which is when a professional talks to the parents about what they did positively and negatively during the visit, was described as helpful for the child because it allows the parents to be taught the most healthy ways to interact with their children, therefore providing a healthier relationship. Video chat technology has been shown to be helpful as there can be less stress on the child and their non-incarcerated guardian to physically go to the prison, which may be an intimidating place for children. It has also been found that if a program can serve the family holistically, the child can reap more benefits as everyone around them can be better equipped to be a positive figure in their life. Finally, it has been found that there should be family-focused services within the jail to provide the child with more comfort to be around their parents as well as comfort to the parent to interact with their child (Charles et al., 2021). Although not all four of these characteristics may be able to fit in one program, it is important to have programs within systems that do touch these four characteristics in order to provide the most comprehensive support for children and potentially reduce the level of juvenile delinquency.

The gender of the parent who was incarcerated also played a large role in the effectiveness of the interventions. A study conducted by Miller and colleagues found that mother incarceration can have more debilitation issues. Caregivers are critical to children's stability, and considering younger children tend to be around their mothers more often, this stability can be more drastically disrupted when they leave, (Miller et al., 2013). This was then demonstrated further by another study that found a strong mother-child relationship can protect from the negative factors of losing a parent to prison, (Kjellstrand et al., 2020). This means that if a father goes to prison if the child has a strong bond with their mother they may be at a lower risk. Therefore, if the mother ends up being incarcerated it can be harder on the child, causing more negative effects on their life and development. That being said, it is important to note that the intervention strategies used may depend on the gender of the parent incarcerated. It may be more beneficial for a child who has a mother incarcerated to be provided with the nursery intervention program that allows toddlers and infants to maintain attachment to their mothers. On the other hand, when a child has their father incarcerated it can be important to engage in fun activities with their father to maintain the father figure attachment. Described below are the different intervention strategies used for both cases.

As the importance of mother-child relationships is important for the health of the child, several interventions for children of incarcerated parents have focused on supporting maternal incarceration. For example, *Girl Scouts Behind Bars* aims to support the bond between a mother and daughter by using shared activities, such as drawing, games, cooking, and reading, to strengthen this bond and build better mental health (Miller, 2006). While the program has shown initial positive results, such as the child creating better social attachments and performing better



in academic settings, its findings are limited in generalizability due to the small sample size. Understanding this program's effectiveness would benefit from a more widespread evaluation.

A more widely implemented program in female prisons, *Prison Nurseries*, focuses on creating a mother-child bond. Two studies (Hoffman et al., 2010; Ricci et al., 2022) have focused on the importance and use of prison nurseries within female prisons. These nurseries allow mothers to have time with their babies to support the mother-child bond, allowing for the baby to develop attachment in a healthy manner (Hoffman et al., 2010). In more recent years this program has expanded to teach parenting and child development classes while the mother spends time with their baby (Ricci et al., 2022). Due to the widespread nature of this intervention, the ability to see attachment develop over time, and looking at reincarceration rates, these studies were able to effectively determine that prison nurseries have positively benefited the children of incarcerated parents. Hoffman writes that this program has effectively broken the intergenerational cycle of crime by allowing the parents to maintain these relationships with their children as well as learn how to parent in a positive manner. Additionally, it was found that this program reduced disruptive behaviors in school as well as increased the child's academic performance overall (Hoffman et al., 2010).

One final mother-specific intervention that was researched is called, *Reading Family Ties: Face to Face*. This program allows mothers to visit twice a week via the internet to see their children and Mothers record themselves reading books for their children to listen to whenever needed (Hoffmann et al., 2010). The program *Safe Babies Court System*, which advocates for children within the foster care system due to parental incarceration, utilizes a similar approach to *Reading Family Ties* by allowing children to receive recordings of books being read to them (Ricci et al., 2022). Both studies have shown the effectiveness of these

programs by looking at the relational progress of the children throughout the programs as well as behaviors within their relationships at home. The stronger the relationship the children created with their mothers, the better they were at making relationships at home, (Ricci et al., 2022). This means that by maintaining the relationship with their parents, the children were able to correctly develop relational skills for others in their lives.

Moving onto programs that are not gender specific, several researched interventions have evidence for effectiveness. Three programs meet the requirements described above. Deferred Prosecution Unit-Social Workers in Family Services (DPU-SWIFS) is a program that addresses the intergenerational crime of incarcerated parents by providing children with support groups as a means to reduce the likelihood of juvenile delinquency (Miller, 2006). The program is designed to address the high level of incarceration rates among children who have or have had parents incarcerated. This program has evolved since this study has done and become a larger idea in which several programs are implemented throughout. DPU-SWIFS allows children to talk about their sadness and other feelings in a safe setting. Children in this program report that this program has allowed them to feel more comfortable talking about their parent's incarceration and felt as though they had more networks of support, (Miller, 2006). This will allow children to feel less alone and more likely to develop positive social behaviors.

The *Parenting Inside Out Program* has also been shown to positively impact children's lives while having parents incarcerated. This program intertwines several different key elements to help both the children and parents. There are classes for parents to take, face-to-face interactions with their children that parents reflect upon, and separate support for both the child and parent (Eddy et al., 2013). This program became popular and most family support centers in the U.S. have implemented it. When children and parents are enrolled in the *Inside Out Program*

the rates of parental reincarceration are significantly lower and juvenile delinquency among children is lower as well (Eddy et al., 2013). After this program, parents were 180% more likely to engage in their children's life, (Eddy et al., 2013). This proved to affect the children positively as it allowed them to increase their level of support.

A final promising program is the *Early Intervention Pilot Project* which provides individualized services that were comprehensive and used for however long the child needed (Phillips et al., 2012). This “incarceration sensitive” program helped specifically with the child’s mental health and how to overcome the difficulties of having a parent incarcerated. As described in its name, it is a pilot program so this evaluation of its effectiveness is limited to whether it is an implementable program. Nonetheless, it was found that the children who were enrolled in the program showed a positive change in their mental health and performance (Phillips et al., 2012). Further research is required before the project is put into widespread action; however, initial results promise to help the mental health of children with an incarcerated parent.

### **Current Study**

Based on the literature, the purpose of this senior honor’s thesis is to conduct two interviews with two institutes in the state of New Hampshire to better understand the intervention and strategies used to support New Hampshire children of incarcerated parents and those that care for them. This research is being done to understand the alignment between current strategies being used and the research on what is best practice. The research literature has shown the need for interventions, it is now our job to implement and review the programs we have in place.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

For this study, I conducted interviews that would provide information about the current intervention strategies that are being implemented in New Hampshire. The first interview was with a representative of the Family Connections Center at the Concord State Prison, which also oversees the family connection centers in the Berlin and Concord State Prisons as well as any New Hampshire halfway houses. Located in the New Hampshire Department of Corrections, the Family Connections Center provides family support services at each of the associated minimum-security units. The interview was chosen because of the ability to provide additional information regarding which intervention strategies have been used by Family Connections Center as well as which strategies have proved to be most effective for the children. The Family Connection Center provides basic parenting classes, healthy relationships classes, and weekly support groups.

To gain insight into intervention strategies provided outside of the Department of Corrections' prison system, an additional interview was conducted with a representative of the New Hampshire Children's Trust. The interview was chosen because of the ability to provide information regarding how New Hampshire chooses to allocate state and federal funds to non-governmental organizations to support children with incarcerated parents and their caregivers as well as what interventions prove most beneficial according to data collected by the organization. The primary use of funds overseen by the NH Children's Trust is focused on family strengthening and aiding in family support.

### **Procedures**

Study interviews were performed over Zoom to provide the best platform to allow for both parties to meet as well as record the interview. The interviews, both about an hour long, were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were then coded and summarized to highlight

significant characteristics common to the information provided about the two organizations (Department of Corrections Family Connections Center and the NH Children's Trust).

Synthesized information was then compared to the strategies provided in the evidence-based best practices literature. A comparison was made between the literature review strategies and the strategies that were most effective in New Hampshire. These interview questions were asked in both interviews in the same order and were as follows:

- 1.) What are your specific responsibilities within this organization? What role do you play? What say do you have in the intervention strategies that are implemented to support children of incarcerated parents?
- 2.) How does your organization define success for children of incarcerated parents within these intervention strategies? What data do you collect to understand the well-being of children with incarcerated parents?
- 3.) For the children of the incarcerated parents, do you have any specific intervention strategies that are implemented throughout this program in order to help the children or families through this difficult time? If so, what are their implementation strategies and what is their purpose?
- 4.) What are the strategies that have proven to be the most successful or least successful? Why or why not? How have they proven to uphold this success rate?
- 5.) Has your organization discussed implementing any other strategies throughout this program to help the children/families? If so, what are those strategies and in what ways are they supposed to help?
- 6.) Are there intervention programs that are implemented through this center that are also implemented in several other centers? Are you working with others to develop strategies

that are found to be the most effective? If so, how have these relationships and contacts helped?

7.) Is there any other essential information that you would like to share? Are there any other organizations or individuals that I should speak with?

## **Results**

### **Defining Success**

In terms of defining success for the interventions that have been used by these programs, both interviewees stated that recidivism data was the key statistic that is looked at. More specifically, both found that when the recidivism rates of the parents were lower compared to parents who had not gone through this program, this correlated with the juvenile satisfaction rates as it meant that children could rely on their parents once free from prison. This meant that juveniles benefited from the interventions most when the parents' recidivism rates were lower or none. Additionally, The Family Connections Center added that it can also be important to look at the intergenerational cycle of incarceration. She says her team asks the question, "Can we improve the relationship between incarcerated parents and their children to reduce the child's likelihood of becoming incarcerated themselves?" This means that The Family Connections Center also looks at the statistics of intergenerational incarceration to define the success of these interventions. NH Children's Trust works takes the statistics from the Family Connections Center, as well as several others, and uses this data to decide how successful each intervention has been. Therefore, both interviewees defined success in the same manner.

### **Successful vs. Unsuccessful Strategies**

It is also important to look at which strategies have proven to be either the most successful or least successful for these two organizations. When asked this question, both interviewees had a difficult time responding. Both institutions said it can be difficult to fully define success. Additionally, they both found that each intervention works differently for everyone. Some children tended to respond better to group intervention whereas others responded better to one on one time with their incarcerated parents. The Family Connection Center said that most important, "...having caring and consistent programming is what will be most successful." The Children's Trust works daily to ensure that this programming obtains the funding that is needed to remain consistent, agreeing with its importance in creating successful interventions.

### **Most Vital Interventions**

When asked about the specific intervention strategies that both organizations depicted as their most vital strategies, a major difference could be identified. The Family Connections Center listed several different programs that her organization has determined to be vital to their programming. However, The Children's Trust was only able to list one program that they found to be most vital. In addition to this, The Children's Trust listed resource centers to be vital, which may imply the several other strategies that The Family Connections Center listed. This difference occurs due to the difference in roles between the two interviewees when it comes to the intervention strategies.

Both interviewees discussed the Family Ties Inside Out Program to be one of the most vital interventions. This strategy includes Zoom sessions with the parent, child, and counselor to conduct family therapy sessions. Additionally, they include reentry planning for the parent, non-court-involved mediation, and support group opportunities. Both organizations decided this

program was vital due to the decreased reincarceration rates that are affiliated with this program. Additionally, it was found that the children that went through this program reported increased satisfaction in their daily lives.

The Family Connections Center identified several other strategies that she also deemed to be important interventions. One program identified was parenting classes. Although this was not a direct intervention for the children, the parenting classes helped teach the incarcerated parents the best way to care for their children. This, in turn, increased the children's satisfaction at home. Additionally, The Family Connections Center found that their Family Fun Day also had a positive outcome. This day included activities, food, and games that children partook in with their parents. By allowing the parent and child to engage in fun activities, this allowed the child to share a positive memory with their parents, therefore being a successful intervention. Finally, The Family Connections Center added that the Children of Incarcerated Parents Summer Camp was another vital intervention. This summer camp allowed children to be with others whom they can relate to. During two of the days, the children got to spend with their incarcerated parents. The Family Connections Center saw great success with this program and a greater increase in children's satisfaction. Although The Children's Trust was unable to list these different resources, by listing family resource centers as a vital intervention, she was able to identify the programming that Connections Centers have created.

### **New Implementations**

When asked if they were considering implementing anything new within their organizations, both interviewees had similar answers. The Family Connections Center is working to create longitudinal studies to further identify the success rates of these interventions. The Children's Trust is working to create more comprehensive surveys to further identify the success



of the different interventions. Both interviewees are working to further identify the success of the different interventions with the hopes of helping more children and parents.

### **Final Thoughts**

When asked if they had anything else they would like to share, both interviewees had one final message to share. The organizations both stated the importance of reducing the stigma around incarcerated parents and redefining hope for these children and parents. The Children's Trust stated that they work through the Hope Framework. This being based on the concept that even though you have experienced adverse childhood experiences, there is hope. These experiences do not determine your life path. Both organizations have the same end goal in mind, and this is to help as many individuals as possible, and spread hope to others.

### **Discussion**

Juveniles with incarcerated parents need interventions to help them through the traumatic experience. With increased likelihood of developing aggressive behaviors, depression, attachment issues, and several other problems, it becomes imperative that they get the right help (Kremer et al., 2020). Some of the most common intervention programs for these children were found to be the Family Ties Inside Out Program, Prison Nurseries, Parenting Inside Out Program, and any programming that allows face-to-face interactions with their incarcerated parents. After conducting the two interviews, it was found that several of these strategies were utilized within these organizations as well. It is important to look at how well the organizations aligned their strategies and statistics with the facts found in the literature review to determine how effective the strategies are.

As parental incarceration causes children to lose their primary caregivers, this can cause children to develop attachment issues throughout their lives. Therefore, it has been identified that

parental visitation can be a vital intervention for the children of the incarcerated parents, (Eddy et al., 2013.) When the interviewees were asked which interventions were the most successful, all responses included interventions that allowed for interaction between the parent and the child. The Family Ties Inside Out Program provides children with the ability to interact with both their parents and a counselor. By attending Zoom meetings, the children can enhance their relationship with their parents, therefore helping them create healthier attachment bonds. Both organizations were able to identify the importance of this through monitoring interactions as well as synthesizing their data.

The literature review additionally stressed the overall message that children should not have to feel punished and have these negative effects placed on them because of their parents' incarceration, (La Vigne et al., 2008). In order to combat this feeling, The Family Connections Center created interventions like the Summer Camp for Children who have Incarcerated Parents. This organization explained that this summer camp helped to alleviate some of the pressure on the children and allowed them to enjoy themselves and enjoy spending time with their parents. Overall, this intervention helped the children feel less punished by allowing them to view this situation in a more entertaining manner.

Although these positive outcomes from the interventions could be enough to deem them successful, both the NH Children's Trust and The Family Connections Center expressed additional points needed to be looked at to determine success. Both organizations determined that they define success by viewing recidivism data. This means that when the parents go through these interventions with their children and do not return to prison upon being released, they found that the children had better outcomes, such as more developed attachments, better academic achievement, and staying away from delinquent behavior. Although the literature

review did not explicitly determine how they defined success in terms of the interventions listed, the researchers did look more at statistics that involved the child's behaviors over the parent's behaviors. This means that to determine which interventions were helping the children they looked at statistics such as academic achievement, behavioral issues, mental health, and development for these children, (Miller, 2006). It would be difficult to say that one of these methods is more beneficial than the other, but it would be important for organizations to define success in the same manner to collaborate more efficiently.

Regardless of how success is defined, both interviewees determined that it remains a difficult task to fully determine the success of an intervention. The Family Connections Center described that children require different types of interventions dependent upon what works best for them. However, the literature review described four key components that create the most beneficial programming for these children. The use of visit coaching, video chat technology, serving the family holistically, and family-focused were these four key components, (Charles et al., 2021). This still does not disprove the interviewees' concept that different children need different services, because all four of these components can be implemented into several different types of services. Therefore, learning more about the child's likes and dislikes is important to determine which intervention would be the most beneficial.

Regardless of the intervention that each child decides to take part in, it is important to gather enough data to decide what is going well and what is going poorly. In order to do this, organizations are always looking for new ways to collect data. The Family Connections Center and the NH Children's Trust are both implementing new surveys and studies to determine what is working well, and how to further create new interventions. The research found in the literature review stresses the importance of finding newer and better ways to help these children, which is

exactly what these organizations are trying to do. Step by step, researchers and implementers are looking for ways to better assist these young kids to overcome the trauma of having a parent incarcerated. The most important similarity between the research and interviews is that both stress the importance of building hope among these children and lending a helping hand to all those in need.

### **Future Directions**

Although both organizations do provide a lot for the children and parents, there are a couple of additional steps that could be taken to better the services provided to these young children. It is important that all of these organizations can collaborate efficiently, therefore ensuring that the definition of success is parallel among all organizations is an important step to take. Additionally, it would be helpful to create interventions that do provide education for the guardians of the children while their parents are incarcerated. This would allow the caregiver to learn more about supporting the child and how to better navigate through this difficult time. Although these are great steps, it is also important to look at how the research around this topic can be furthered.

When looking at the research aspect of these interventions, creating longitudinal studies may help organizations better determine the success of the interventions in the future. Taking this step may provide a much brighter future for children who do have parents incarcerated. It would also be beneficial for researchers to look more at the role society plays in helping these children because the world around them can make a large impact on how these children handle the trauma of having a parent incarcerated.

### **Conclusion**

Although it is difficult to determine the most effective intervention strategies for children who have parents incarcerated, organizations in New Hampshire have made large strides in providing an array of interventions for these children. Additionally, research around this topic has allowed for more strategies to be implemented that target specific trauma among these children. New Hampshire is taking steps to help these children overcome some of the most difficult times in their lives and others must do the same. With the increasing rates of children with parents incarcerated, this is becoming a larger issue than ever imagined. Not only will these interventions support these children's mental health, but they may also deter them from following the intergenerational cycle of delinquency and becoming juvenile delinquents themselves. Small steps can make large changes, and continuing to make these small steps can change the lives of many for the better.

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