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HMSV8220 Scholarly and Professional Writing in Human Services

Assessment 2 – Article Synthesis

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Article Synthesis

Topic: Impacts of Parental Incarceration on Children

Although America is known as the land of the free, it is number one in incarceration of its citizens (Prison Policy Initiative, n.d.). This becomes even more problematic as a large majority of incarcerated individuals are parents, resulting in destructive collateral consequences for their children and non-incarcerated caregivers alike (Genty, 2003). Collateral consequences are a variety of legal and regulatory restrictions that prevent formerly incarcerated individuals from finding work, securing housing, pursuing professional development, or participating in civic activities, such as voting (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2024).

Parental incarceration has unfortunate collateral consequences for children, rendering them unwitting and undeserving victims of housing instability, health issues, educational deficits, and social stigma (Shaw, 2022). These issues also have cumulative impacts, harming not just households, but entire communities, creating unrelenting cycles of poverty and desperation. This paper examines five journal articles, synthesizing their findings and the various harmful effects of parental incarceration on children, families, and communities. It also includes analysis of both complimentary and contradictory findings and concludes with final thoughts and recommendations for future research.

Selected Articles

Article 1: Mass Incarceration and Children's Health

Conway, J. M. (2021). Mass incarceration and children's health: A state-level analysis of adverse birth outcomes and infant, child, and teen mortality. *Family & Community Health, 44*(3), 194-205. <https://doi.org/10.1097/FCH.0000000000000295>

Relevant Findings

In this study, Conway sets out to determine whether mass incarceration as a systemic issue is a logical explanation for poor health outcomes and birth defects in American children. Family member incarceration is often described as a traumatic experience, also known as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), increasing one's likelihood of developing mental health issues, chronic diseases, and at its absolute worst, death (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). Though infant mortality is typically attributed to birth defects, Conway posits that the effects of a family member's incarceration such as economic hardship, stress, neglect, and housing instability, are contributors to poor birth outcomes and childhood mortality. The study examines the issue through US state panel data spanning from 1990 to 2017, leveraging multiple governmental sources such as US Bureau of Statistics Data, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's WONDER Databases, and the KIDS COUNT data center. The study did not include jail data. However, jail sentences, even short-term, would likely echo Conway's prison incarceration findings, as it is a traumatic and forced removal of a parent from a family's structure. Conway utilized weighted least squares regression to analyze the various health indicators where a state's incarceration rates became the main predicting factor of poor outcomes. Until this point, little research had been done on understanding child and teen mortality as it connects to parental incarceration, making this study another critical puzzle piece in understanding how a parent's incarceration negatively impacts a child's life and health, even before birth.

Conway's study indeed found yearly incarceration rates proved useful in predicting poor health outcomes for children. Some of the more serious health implications for children include low-birth weight, pre-term birth (birth before 37 weeks gestational age), and increased risk for infant and child mortality. The adverse outcomes were also substantially higher for black

children, a group already disproportionately impacted by higher rates of parental incarceration. The author discusses how these identified poor outcomes stem from an incarcerated parent's absence, resulting in increased economic hardship, lack of access to resources, and higher levels of caregiver stress. The study also explored the devastating impacts on communities already under strain due to economic, racial, and various other inequities, such as an inability to form social connections and safety nets. Conway was also able to determine that a state's increased spending on social welfare programs such as food assistance translates to lower rates of incarceration. This aligns with multiple studies finding that crime is a result of desperation and one's inability to meet basic needs (Mehlum et al, 2005). Conway's study serves as an important reminder for policy and law makers: incarceration is harmful not just to families, but to communities at large, rendering alternatives to incarceration or post-incarceration interventions necessary.

Article 2: The Intergenerational Effects of Paternal Incarceration on Children's Social and Psychological Well-Being from Early Childhood to Adolescence

Del Toro, J., Fine, A., & Wang, M. (2023). The intergenerational effects of paternal incarceration on children's social and psychological well-being from early childhood to adolescence. *Development and Psychopathology*, 35(2), 558-569. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579421001693>

Relevant Findings

Familial incarceration is no doubt difficult for any child, but this study finds that paternal incarceration is especially harmful, negatively impacting a child's mental well-being and social interactions. Utilizing the Fragile Families and Child Well Being Study, a 10-year longitudinal analysis of 4,327 families across 20 urban cities, the authors set out to determine whether the incarceration of a father triggered subsequent rule-breaking behavior and depressive symptoms

in children. Data collection spanned multiple waves, with the researchers specifically examining the final three at ages 5, 9, and 15. Parents and caregivers answered questionnaires relating to rule-breaking and depressive symptoms, requiring researchers to tally the individual results and calculate zero-order bivariate correlations.

The study determined the combination of paternal incarceration and its impacts, coupled with current living situations, could exacerbate conditions for undesirable behaviors such as risk-taking and rule-breaking. The journal authors determined that paternal incarceration around the age of 5 made children more likely to engage in rule-breaking behaviors later in their lives. The authors of the study attribute this behavior to many compounding variables, such as grieving the traumatic loss of their father as well as experiencing poverty and housing instability, a combination negatively impacting a child's safety and sense of well-being. The additional strain on their caretakers further places limits on the supportive relationships around them. Conway's study also finds that these children typically live in neighborhoods already suffering through social and economic barriers, creating cycles of economic hardship and poverty. These unfavorable and involuntary conditions lead to and exacerbate rule-breaking behavior; individuals who experience stressful events often feel powerless and become more likely to lash out at people around them. It is this frustration and inability to overcome involuntary economic and educational barriers that pushes incarceration-impacted children to engage in sensory-seeking and risk-taking behavior. The study's results stress the desperate need for increased social supports and alternatives to parental incarceration.

Article 3: Disrupting the Family Stress-Proximal Process: A Scoping Review of Interventions for Children with Incarcerated Parents

Obus, E. A., Pequet, A., Cristian, C. R., Garfinkle, A., Pinto, C. A., & Gray, S. A. O. (2024). Disrupting the family stress-proximal process: A scoping review of interventions for children with incarcerated parents. *Children and Youth Services Review, 161*, 107604. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2024.107604>

Relevant Findings

This 2024 scoping review explores opportunities to mitigate the harmful impacts of parental incarceration on families and communities by identifying beneficial programs and interventions for children and their caregivers. Utilizing research scoping review methodology, the team sought out studies for intervention programs including children ages birth to 18 years, and the resulting measured outcomes for the children involved. Scoping review enables researchers to map information about a particular topic, but also identifies potential gaps in the literature, enabling future researchers to tackle uncharted territory (Mak & Thomas, 2022).

Recognizing that parental incarceration impacts multiple facets of a child's life, the authors identified three proximal processes for successful targeted interventions: at home caregiver support, contact and visiting experiences with the parent, and child social support. The authors' proposed interventions include multiple solutions, such as residential parenting programs, a more popular example being in-prison nurseries, enabling mothers to care for their infants until reaching a certain age. Parenting education and extended visiting programs also proved useful in maintaining and strengthening family bonds. Programs that offered child coping skill development and social support, as well as caregiver support, led to improved relationship outcomes. Improved social support and mechanisms for children led to healthy and productive ways to process the absence of a parent, rather than internalizing the pain and trauma. Despite data demonstrating that increased parental contact leads to better academic and emotional

outcomes, obstacles exist that may require social spending solutions. One such example is availability of financial resources impeding parental contact, such as the cost of phone calls and video visits. Legal issues could also become an obstacle, such as court orders or custody gatekeeping. The findings could be extremely helpful for nonprofit organizations, policymakers, and practitioners in developing policies and programs intent on maintaining rather than straining familial relationships.

Article 4: Financial Strain, the Transference of Stigma, and Residential Liability: A Qualitative Analysis of the Long-Term Effects of Parental Incarceration

Shaw, M. (2023). Financial strain, the transference of stigma, and residential instability: A qualitative analysis of the long-term effects of parental incarceration. *Family Relations*, 72(4), 1773-1789. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12763>

Relevant Findings

Though all prior studies examined the various types of strain placed on families during parental incarceration, this study seeks to understand thematic long-term effects, including financial strain, residential instability, and social stigma thrust upon family members, impeding a family's ability to succeed. Shaw's in-depth qualitative study collects data through interviews with adult participants who experienced parental incarceration in their lifetimes. Shaw examines the problem through Agnew's Strain Theory, explaining how individuals blocked from upward mobility or pathways to success feel frustration, making them more likely to engage in criminal activity as a means of coping with the negative circumstances and environment around them (Agnew, 1992). The collection of data stresses that parental incarceration punishes not just the incarcerated parent, but their families and society, too. The study also examines the phenomenon of "answering for" a loved one's crime through the resulting social stigma.

Participants reported multiple negative impacts affected them even through adulthood, such as housing instability, inability to attend school, lack of financial resources, and social stigmatization. One such example is that of a late-adolescent child who, after their mother's incarceration, had to care for siblings and dropped out of college. This strain on finances and housing prevents individuals from focusing on their own educational success, disrupting opportunities for the future stability of themselves and their future families. Stigma also prevented study participants' parents from finding employment, but some participants were deemed "unworthy" or "undesirable" because of their family identity and status. Shaw also noted that stigma transference was most prevalent for black families, creating opportunity for research on intergenerational stigma and race.

Article 5: Parental Incarceration and Parent-Youth Closeness

Turney K. (2023). Parental incarceration and parent-youth closeness. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 85(5), 1087–1109. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12919>

Relevant Findings

Turney's 2023 study seeks to understand how parental incarceration impacts the intergenerational relationships between incarcerated parents and their children. Using secondary data, Turney seeks understanding on familial involvement and structure during incarceration and how it affects children's relationships with both incarcerated and non-incarcerated parents. The Future of Families and Child Well Being study followed a cohort of children and collecting data over the span of 15 years, allowing Turney to uncover three key findings: incarceration, whether jail or prison, negatively impacts closeness, the timing of parental incarceration in a child's life matters, and the relationship between the parents themselves carries significant weight in the development of child-parent relationships.

Unsurprisingly, Turney found that parental incarceration is negatively associated with closeness between children and an incarcerated parent. However, the stress of parental incarceration also impairs children's relationships with the non-incarcerated parent, as stress reduces one's ability to parent effectively. Incarceration greatly limits a family's ability to communicate, as well as ability to participate in the family structure, mostly due to their absence from the home, but further complicated by costly phone and video call fees (Dholakia, 2024). Families experience multiple stresses and strains, to include financial hardship and impacts to mental health, affecting the quality of parenting abilities for non-incarcerated parents. Further, the child's age at the time of a parent's incarceration matters, as early to mid-childhood has the largest impact on closeness with an incarcerated parent, though incarceration during adolescence results in a closer relationship with the non-incarcerated parent. The state of the relationship between parents also plays a role in the closeness between incarcerated parents and children, as children are more likely to feel closer to the non-incarcerated parent. The study recommends policymakers and practitioners pay more attention to child-parent relationships, both during and after incarceration.

Synthesis of Articles

Similar or Complimentary Findings

All five articles discuss the unfortunate downstream effects of parental incarceration, both sharing similarities as well as contradictions. The findings confirm various hidden impacts such as mental, physical, and financial implications that can last well into adulthood, especially for minorities. The selected literature also cements the reality that parental incarceration is harmful not just to children, but to their communities as well. Collectively, the findings demonstrate why policymakers must embrace evidence-based decision making and take

meaningful steps toward limiting and mitigating the unintended harm inflicted on future generations.

Intergenerational Collateral Consequences

Incarceration rarely impacts just the person who is alleged to have committed a crime, especially if that person is a parent. All literature confirmed that parental incarceration creates significant physical and mental implications for impacted individuals' children, families, and communities. The spectrum of symptoms is wide, including harm to physical and mental health, financial hardship, barriers to educational attainment, negative impact on family relationships, and societal stigmatization (Conway, 2022; Del Toro et al, 2022; Obus et al, 2024; Shaw, 2023; Turney, 2023).

The negative impacts and risks may appear before birth and follow a child through their entire life course. Conway (2022) confirmed the presence of poor birth outcomes as well as increased odds for infant and child mortality for black families. Shaw (2023) determined parental incarceration does in fact have intergenerational impacts to include financial instability and social stigma, limiting a child's ability to succeed well into adulthood. Social stigma affects more than employment and housing, extending to shame in admitting a loved one is incarcerated (Shaw, 2023). This brand of stigma and its resulting shame often prevent people who need resources from reaching out to organizations that can help (Prison Fellowship, 2022). Shaw (2023) also echoes Del Toro et al (2023) in confirming social and psychological impacts. Finally, the literature reinforces policy and program recommendations put forth by Obus et al (2024), and the dire need for interventions and improved social safety nets to reduce harm inflicted on children, families, and communities.

Disproportionate Impact on Minorities

The collective literature also discusses how incarceration, as well as its collateral consequences, disproportionately impact minorities. Shockingly, people of color makeup nearly 7 out of 10 incarcerated people; these individuals' removal from their similarly socio-ethnic communities sows seeds of distrust for law enforcement, damaging already fragile, complicated relationships (Nellis, 2024). Conway (2022) found that infant and child mortality rates can be accurately predicted by rising incarceration rates, but that black families and children were most impacted. Del Toro et al (2022), by way of the data, examined urban American families across 20 cities; this sampling predominantly featured low-income families of color living in neighborhoods comprised of neighbors closely matching their own ethnic-racial composition. These children were found to already be living in areas subjected to social and economic barriers (Del Toro et al, 2022). Hagan et al (2020) share in their findings that minorities face a set back in educational fulfillment as well, heavily attributed to mass incarceration's targeted racial focus and subsequent financial hardship.

Social Spending and Incarceration Rates

Social spending programs such as food assistance, Medicaid, and housing benefits appear throughout the literature as being of the utmost importance in combating the collateral consequences of parental incarceration. Many of the symptoms of parental incarceration, such as medical issues, poverty, barriers to educational success, and housing instability, are already the primary focuses of social spending programs (Conway, 2022; Del Toro et al, 2022; Obus et al, 2024; Shaw, 2023; Turney, 2023). In their recommendations, Obus et al (2024) suggest multiple programs where governmental intervention and subsequent social spending would likely be necessary.

Many children with incarcerated parents are already enrolled in social assistance programs to varying degrees and success, based entirely on spending and allocation of state budgets (Hagan et al, 2020). Though the efficacy and spending of welfare programs is often a political football, the data demonstrates its importance. History is a significant predictor; examining data from the 1990s, the government made deep cuts to welfare programs and consequently saw an increase in its incarceration-related spending (Hagan et al, 2020). Interestingly, states with less punitive penal policies typically enjoy a reduction in their welfare and educational program spending (Hagan et al, 2020). This is likely due to parents being able to further their children's educations and an improved ability to find employment, while children may also benefit, experiencing improved ability to concentrate in school as their social and financial needs are more closely, if not entirely, met. The investment in social programs and how it directly impacts the rise and fall of incarceration rates offers policymakers critical insight on their importance.

Contradictory Findings

Though the literature generally agrees on major concepts, some contradictory findings do appear. A total of three main contradictions were identified while reviewing the literature: the authors' emphasis on paternal versus maternal incarceration, incarceration's impacts on familial closeness, and the absence of jail incarceration data in some of the studies. These contradictions identify opportunities for much needed and likely insightful future studies.

Emphasis on Paternal vs. Maternal Incarceration

Though several of the studies discuss the overall importance of parental involvement, some seemingly insinuate paternal rather than maternal incarceration results in more harms and collateral consequences. While the number of incarcerated fathers increased over the last two

decades of the 20th century, the number of incarcerated mothers also increased to 8 times that of totals in 1980 (Shaw, 2022; Western & Wildeman, 2009; Sheet, 2015). Though they did examine data around maternal incarceration in their study, Del Toro et al (2022) contends that paternal incarceration is a more traumatic kind of paternal loss. However, the loss of a mother to incarceration could arguably be even more traumatic, as mothers are typically the primary caretakers for children, putting children at increased risk of entering the foster care system (Brock, 2024). To Del Toro et al (2022)'s credit, they indeed confirmed that paternal incarceration predicts children's rule-breaking behavior more than any other type of paternal loss, such as illness or sudden death. Additional studies also confirm that paternal incarceration incites educational disparities among children, affecting school readiness and grade retention, and less likelihood of future college attendance (Hagan et al, 2020). As an additional thought, presence of behaviors may occur not just because children are sad and unsure of how to process their emotions as Del Toro et al (2022) suggests, but because of massive disruption to culturally traditional family roles. Paternal incarceration means that children no longer face the stereotypical and commonly used threat of "just wait until your father gets home," as fathers are traditionally cast as the primary disciplinarians in their homes (Macleod & Lesch, 2024).

Increased Familial Closeness

Nearly all studies conclude that parental incarceration has behavioral and mental health implications for children, but Turney (2023) finds adolescents may grow closer to a non-incarcerated parent during a parent's incarceration. On its surface, this conflicts with Del Toro et al (2022), whose findings suggest children with an incarcerated father are more likely to demonstrate depressive behaviors and worsened adjustment as they progress into adolescence. Depressive behaviors typically include withdrawing behavior, rather than drawing closer to a

caregiver or non-incarcerated parent (Del Toro et al, 2022; Kanter et al, 2008). However, the work by Obus et al (2024) may account for the variance between these findings. If children and caregivers in Turney's study were offered support programs, it could result in markedly improved relationship outcomes (Obus et al, 2024). Additional research regarding impacts on adolescents regarding parental incarceration as well as caregiver relationships would aid in better understanding these family dynamics.

Mixed Inclusion of Jail Data

The studies were mixed on whether they included both jail and prison incarceration data. Conway (2023) does not explain why jail data is not present and accounted for, only that it was not included. The reason for this may be two-fold; first, that jail data is typically at the local and county level and lack of reporting mechanisms can make this data harder to obtain, but also that jail is typically used for short term incarceration (Department of Justice, n.d). Del Toro et al (2022) does not explicitly state whether both jail and prison data are included in their findings. Jail data is equally important in telling the story of parental incarceration; on any given day, 2.7 million children have a parent serving time in either jail or prison (Ghandnoosh et al, 2021). Turney (2023) reinforces this belief, confirming that incarceration, whether by means of a jail or prison sentence, negatively affects relationships between parents and children. As a result, it is worth further exploration to understand short-term incarceration effects to aid in implementing harm reduction programs and policies for children, caregivers, and communities.

In Conclusion

Incarceration not only generates collateral consequences for the impacted individual to include potentially life long barriers to housing and employment, but it generates a ripple effect through a community; impacting people connected to or depending on the incarcerated person

(McKay et al, 2018; American Bar Association, 2018). Parental incarceration imposes several collateral consequences on loved ones, such as intergenerational poverty, physical and mental health issues, disruptive behavior, and sadly, the destruction of familial bonds. The collateral consequences of mass incarceration are silently and insidiously creating a national health crisis for America's youth. However, it does not need to be this way. Though more research is needed to understand the full impacts of parental incarceration, mitigating its effects through evidence-based policies and interventions can relieve tension on families and communities, changing lives for the better and breaking cycles of poverty.

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