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Children affected by parental imprisonment are vulnerable to a range of suboptimal health and social outcomes. The incarceration of a parent has a profound effect on children who may have already been exposed to a range of life adversity issues. Parental imprisonment is a growing global concern, not least because of the impact of social, economic and ethnic inequities upon incarceration but because the influence of mass imprisonment 'extends far beyond parents to entire families and neighborhoods' (Wakefield and Wildeman, 2011: 806).

Parental incarceration results in enforced separation of parents and children, infrequent and restricted contact and inconsistent caregiving arrangements that may pose further risk to child outcomes (Kobak and Madsen, 2008). This separation is not associated with the level of community support provided for other forms of separation such as the death of a parent (Phillips and Gates, 2011). Indeed, loss associated with parental imprisonment not only separates the child from their parent but often separates them from friends and community. It is a loss that extends well beyond the parent simply being absent (Geller et al., 2012).

Separation from their parents as a result of incarceration may affect children's behaviour (Murray et al., 2012), lead to feelings of alienation (Shlafer and Poehlmann, 2010), anxiety and depression (Murray and Farrington, 2008) that impact upon children's education (Trice and Brewster, 2004). Stigma is associated with parental imprisonment and is known to have a negative impact on health and well-being (Phillips and Gates, 2011).

Children with a parent in custody experience associative stigma, which occurs when a person is ostracized or fears ostracism because of their relationship with someone who is a member of a stigmatized group (Quinn and Chaudoir, 2009). The labelling of these children as different can be accompanied by stereotyping and discrimination that causes stress, lowers children's self-esteem and confidence and can potentially affect mental and physical health.

How can we support children with an incarcerated parent?

There is a growing body of evidence demonstrating that children who know the 'truth' about their imprisoned parent's whereabouts fair better than those who are told 'stories' such as your dad/mum is 'working away'. Children who have been deceived about their parent's whereabouts have exhibited disobedience, temper tantrums, destructive or delinquent behaviour (Seymour, 1998). Telling 'the truth' opens doors for further questions about prisons and creates a space to explore children's wishes regarding parental contact and helps them deal with stigma. Safe contact can provide comfort to families, and for those where contact cannot be appropriately managed by the carer at home, organisations including Person Shaped Support in the United Kingdom or SHINE for Kids in Australia offer support.

What strategies can enhance outcomes for children affected by parental imprisonment?

Parental incarceration requires urgent attention including addressing stigma and children's well-being through interventions that build upon children's coping strategies to foster resilience (Dawson et al., 2012). Manning (2011) argues that the effects of parental incarceration have largely been ignored in public policy debates, and Boudin (2011: 118) notes that the consideration of children's needs within the criminal justice system is not regarded as mandatory, rather as 'discretionary, as a matter of privilege'.

Policymakers should take a lead in ameliorating the harmful effects of parental incarceration on children. Nurses and other health professionals must use their influence to help drive and shape policy that protects children and most importantly prevents families from coming into contact with the criminal justice system. In neighbourhoods with high rates of crime and incarceration, integrated measures need to be taken to target the resources and mediate the negative effects of imprisonment on children and families (Comfort et al., 2011).

Authors' Note

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