

What Exactly Happens

There are many misconceptions about incarceration and we don't intend to add to them. While we empower communication between children and their parents, there are two caveats to what we champion. First, research behind parental imprisonment and children's behavioral problems is limited, as this is not a subject that has come to the forefront of society's issues until recently; and second, some "unknown number of families benefit from the elimination of a dangerous or burdensome parent" via incarceration (Adalist-Estrin 1994' Women's Prison Association 1995; Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999).¹ We believe incarceration has a positive impact on the child in these cases and we do not encourage communication.

However, "it may more often be the case that a father or mother's imprisonment can be the final, lethal blow to an already weakened family structure" (Adalist-Estrin 1994' Women's Prison Association 1995; Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999, p.138).¹ Therefore, the effects of incarceration are most accurately measured when the "imprisoned parent previously contributed positively to the life of the family," monetarily, socially, academically, etc., even if the contribution is small (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999).

The effects of parental imprisonment vary with the age and gender of the children, the length of separation, the relationship with the new caregiver and the strength of the parent-child relationship. In certain cases, other factors may include any prior periods of separation, "the nature of the parent's crime, the availability of family or support, and the degree of stigma that the community associates with incarceration" (Gaudin & Sputen, 1993; Merenstein, 2011).² Even understanding this, the impact of parental incarceration on children has been cited as possibly "the least understood and most consequential implication of the high reliance on incarceration in America" (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999, p. 122).¹ At Photo Patch, there are three things of which we can be certain: **Financial Loss**, **Trauma**, and **Stigma** result from parental incarceration.

¹John Hagan and Ronit Dinovitzer, "Collateral Consequences of Imprisonment for Children, Communities, and Prisoners" The University of Chicago (1999)

² Merenstein, Beth et al.. "Issues Affecting the Efficacy of Programs for Children with Incarcerated Parents". *Journal of Correctional Education* 62.3 (2011): 166-174.

Part I: Financial Loss

Having an incarcerated parent is a long-term expense, no matter how long the sentence. Upon the parent being incarcerated, the family affected typically loses a household income. Some might argue that this loss is justified if the incarcerated parent is illegally obtaining the money; however studies show incarcerated parents who worked illegally *also* worked legally, and therefore their incarceration has a negative impact on the community's economy, and especially on the family's financial stability.

In addition to the initial loss of income, there is the expense of maintaining contact while the parent is incarcerated. As discussed in our previous article, "What's So Tough about Communication?" it costs a substantial amount of money to visit, maintain an active phone line, and send letters and photos. In addition to that cost, contributing any money to the inmate's commissary, where he or she might buy toiletries or snacks; and bringing fresh food or a winter coat to an inmate, not only costs a good sum of money, but also an exorbitant amount of time. While there are strict rules regarding what items are permitted as parts of outside packages for inmates (i.e. only hermetically sealed food, no clothes with logos, etc.), the rules are horrendously documented, always changing, capriciously enforced, and always at the inconvenience of the prisoner's visitors.

The financial implications do not end there, as incarcerated parents often cannot find meaningful work after incarceration, and therefore struggle contributing to their families. While there is some debate as to whether prison is intended for rehabilitation or public safety, in stigmatizing prisoners, we give them little to no chance to respectably re-enter society. Worse, "when diminished financial resources and the trauma of paternal absence are coupled with the stigma of parental incarceration (Braman 2004) and possible increases in detrimental parenting behaviors that result (Nurse 2002), the effects of parental incarceration on children may be dire" (Wilderman, p. 285).³

³ Christopher Wilderman, "Paternal Incarceration and Children's Physically Aggressive Behaviors: Evidence from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study." University of Michigan, 89.1 (2010): 285-309

Part II & III: Trauma & Stigma

It should not be surprising that “seeing a father arrested, visiting him in prison, and dealing with paternal absence may traumatize children” (Comfort 2007; Braman 20004; Goffman 2009; Wilderman 2010).³ The disruption of the family structure when parents are incarcerated often results in children seeing the “brokenness” of their home. Because “having a family member incarcerated increases stress (Braman 2004) and depression (Green et al. 2006) ... caretakers might resort to less effective parenting practices,” approaching parenthood with less discipline and guidance at a time when the children often need it the most (Wilderman, p. 287).³ Incarceration also elevates the risk of divorce and separation among parents: actions that compound the trauma children of incarcerated parents often undergo (Lopoo and Western 2005; Wilderman 2010).³

As the remaining single parent struggles, “older children may have to assume unexpected role responsibilities, for example, caring for younger children, and they may also be diverted from school and into early or unplanned labor force participation in order to reduce demands on or to supplement household income” (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999 p. 124-125).¹ Pushed into adulthood before they are ready, these children may turn to criminal activity, early marriage or parenthood “as a means of escaping the disrupted family of origin” (Hagan and Wehaton 1993; Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999).¹

Last, but certainly not least, is the issue of stigma surrounding incarceration, and subsequently the misbehavior and loss of social capital that closely follow. Social capital has been defined as “the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures” 123 Portes (1998, p. 6).¹ The stigma that accompanies incarceration and criminization is a “source of the depletion of the social capital of children” (Hagan and Palloni 1990; Hagan 1992; Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999).¹ This unfortunately is

compounded by the remaining parent (who is often significant other of the incarcerated parent) “withdraw[ing] from social networks (Braman 2004), thereby diminishing the number of ties children can draw upon” (Wilderman, p. 287).³

It has been well documented that children of incarcerated parents may respond to the separation of parental separation similarly to how children who have lost parents due to death or divorce respond. Children who have lost parents due to death or divorce are likely treated with sympathy and kindness; however children who have lost parents to incarceration may feel too ashamed or stigmatized to openly discuss their struggles, therefore eliminating any opportunity to be consoled. Nevertheless, “...the loss of a father due to incarceration often mirrors the symptoms of children in single-parent families who have lost their fathers due to death or divorce, as the family encounters financial instability, and emotional psychological impacts (see, e.g., Moerk 1973; Lowenstein 1986).¹

For many, this isolation grows into something more severe. Some of the effects could “result in acquiring delinquent peers who may be facing the same troubles. Involvement in underground activities such as drugs, gangs, and crime related behaviors are not uncommon results” (Hagans, 1996; Thombre et al. 2009).⁴ As all of these difficulties compound, educational failures, aggression, depression, and withdrawal (see generally, Johnston 1995b)” begin to arise (Hagan & Dinovitzer, p.137).¹ In turn, it is not surprising to learn that “especially in disadvantaged minority communities, the children of this prison generation form a high-risk link to the future” (Hagan & Dinovitzer, p.137).¹ Of course, every child being different results in a variety of reactions. For example, boys will likely respond to parental incarceration with greater physical aggression [whereas] girls... are more likely to respond to parental incarceration with greater internalizing behaviors, as they do to many other stressors” (Cummings, Davies and Campbell 2000’; Malone et al. 2004; p. 287)³

While the effects of loss of social capital can be immediately felt, as “parents, employers, and fellow citizens increasingly recognize large numbers of highly ‘touchy,’ angry young people ready to punish any available target in response to perceived insults of the past,

⁴ Avinash Thombre, David R. Montague, Jennifer Maher and Israt Tusty Zohra. “ If I Could Only Say It Myself: How to Communicate with Children of Incarcerated Parents”. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 60.1 (2009, March)

which may include the stigmatization experienced as children of incarcerated parents;” these effects are known to linger as these children grow into adults (Hagan & Dinovitzer, p.65).¹ Research has found that “a person who has experienced one event may react with even more distress to a second... to the person life might seem to be spiraling out of control” (Hagan & Dinovitzer, p. 127).¹ In other words, while these children may overcome adversity and manage to create successful, rewarding lives for themselves, the trauma and stigma that initially impacted them may follow them throughout life.

Thankfully there is hope. “Adolescents who perceived their parents as supportive were more likely to have less delinquency, school, misconduct, drug and alcohol abuse, which is why Photo Patch exists to facilitate healthy communication between children and their incarcerated parents (Parker & Benson, 2004; Thombre et al., 2009).⁴ Through this, we hope to mitigate some of the detrimental effects of parental incarceration.

This article was written by Krista Staropoli, Chief Editor of Photo Patch Foundation.