

Investigating the rising population in uk prisons



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The prison population in the UK has increased dramatically in recent decades. The number of incarcerated men and women in England and Wales rose over 65% between 1995 and 2009, going from 49, 500 to 82, 100 (Ministry of Justice, 2009). A comparable increase over a similar time period has also been seen in the USA, the prison population increasing 53% from 1, 053, 738 in 1994 to 1, 613, 656 in 2009 (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1995, 2010). In England and Wales this can be partly explained by tougher sentencing for drug-related crimes and violent offences against the person as well as a higher recall rate of offenders to prison due to the breach of their release agreement (Ministry of Justice, 2009); similar trends can be seen in the USA (Hanlon et al, 2007).

Increasing prison population means that proportionally more parents go to prison and research has shown that there is a correlation between parental incarceration and negative outcomes for the offspring (Huebner and Gustafson, 2007; Foster and Hagan 2007). There are however no official records on prisoners' families in the UK (Murray, 2005) or in the USA (Miller, 2006) and the available data is often unreliable due to the incompleteness and duplication of records (Miller, 2006). Lack of methodologically strong research means that the needs of prisoners families may be neglected, it is important to investigate how imprisonment affects this vulnerable group and which policies could ameliorate their situation (Dallaire, 2007). Incarceration may affect all family members, including parents, siblings and more distant relatives yet the developmental influences are greatest on the children of prisoners and therefore, for the purposes of this essay I define family as ' a group consisting of two parents and their children living together as a unit'

(OUD, 2011). I aim in this essay to discuss the effects of imprisonment on prisoners' family members during incarceration, first by exploring the current theoretical framework that helps to explain the consequences of parental incarceration and then by investigating the effects of parent's imprisonment on children and the wider family, mainly drawing on studies carried out in the USA and the UK. There is an important difference in the observed impact between maternal and paternal imprisonment on the family and I will discuss this before finally identifying the limitations of existing research and suggesting how research could inform policies to help prisoners' families.

There are three main theoretical frameworks that try to explain the devastating consequences of parental imprisonment on their offspring: strain theory; socialisation and control theory and stigmatisation. Strain theory discusses how the deteriorating situation of family left behind by an imprisonment negatively affects a child. According to strain theory, the imprisonment of a parent may lead to difficulties in the family's financial status, whereby the remaining caretaker has less time and money to spend on the child (Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999). Children are forced to grow up faster as they need to take on new roles of responsibility; this may deter them from education and subsequently increase the influence of delinquent peers on their behaviour (Huebner and Gustafson, 2007). Also, as the burden of supporting the family has fallen into the hands of a single person, the imprisonment can cause an already financially and emotionally strained family to suffer further exertion, making the separation from the parent more traumatising than if the same event had occurred in a stable supportive family environment (Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999). However, parental

incarceration may have a good effect on offspring if the parent was abusive and neglectful (Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999).

Socialisation and control theory focuses not on the remaining support for the growing child but instead looks at the effects of the absence of the imprisoned parent on the development of the child. According to this second perspective, the incarcerated parent cannot contribute to the family life and may threaten the parent-child attachment, depriving the child from social support, a role model and parental supervision (Huebner and Gustafson, 2007). The remaining caretaker has an increased responsibility over the child (Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999) and reduced parental control over the offspring may increase the influence of delinquent peers and increase the likelihood that the offspring will engage in similar behaviour (Sampson and Laub, 1993). On the other hand, it is uncertain how good of a role model the incarcerated parent was in the first place.

Finally, the stigmatisation perspective proposes that criminal behaviour leaves a mark on all family members and that parental incarceration may cause feelings of rejection and shame and could result in the social exclusion of the children (Foster and Hagan, 2007). Stigmatisation may also help understand the intergenerational effects of parental imprisonment: once the family is tainted as “criminal” the children are more likely to receive a biased treatment from the police and increase the likelihood of getting involved in criminal justice system (Huebner and Gustafson, 2007).

The aforementioned theories are not mutually exclusive and it should be noted that there is a significant element of self- selection within these

frameworks: families with an incarcerated parent versus those without one differ prior to the imprisonment (Foster and Hagan, 2007). The mechanisms that have been put forward to explain why parental incarceration is so influential for children's criminality include: men and women with criminal backgrounds tend to marry and have offspring; children may imitate parents' behaviour; bias of the police and courts; intergenerational criminality; environmental and genetic risks (Farrington, 2002). Thus, the effects of imprisonment may interact with and be confounded by the pre-existing differences between families (Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999). Dallaire (2007a) suggests that both contextual and incarceration related factors may affect children whose parent has been imprisoned, making the children whose parents have been imprisoned especially vulnerable to negative consequences. Contextual influences include poverty and low parental education level, single parenthood, large family size, bad neighbourhood, fragile parental mental health and alcohol and drug abuse (Sameroff et al 1998). Parental incarceration elevates the risk factors related to: the likelihood of the separation of siblings and the placement of children into foster care; the imprisonment of the other parent; as well as the increased likelihood of the involvement of other family members' in criminal behaviour (Dallaire, 2007). Contextual risk factors influence children's educational outcomes and behaviour and when coupled with effects of parental incarceration the previously present problems become amplified, explaining the elevated risks of negative consequences for the children with incarcerated parents (Dallaire, 2007).

Although generalisations can be made on how the imprisonment of a parent influences children, the actual consequences vary greatly between individual cases and can broadly be divided into three main categories: direct, mediated and moderating (Murray, 2005). Studies investigating the direct impacts on children emphasise the distress of separation, lack of knowledge about the parent and behavioural problems related to the child identifying with and mimicking the criminal behaviour of the parent (Murray, 2005). Bowlby's attachment theory (1973) explains these outcomes by postulating that parent-child separation negatively affects psychosocial development for children from all age groups, disrupts attachment security and may lead to internalising behaviours like depression and low self-esteem (Emery, 1999). In contrast, Murray and Farrington (2008) argue that it is not separation on its own that causes distress but the nature of separation. Research on children who are separated from a parent due to illness, death or divorce suggests that while these causes help bring the family together, separation due to incarceration has a different effect because of the humiliation that is associated with it (Fritsch and Burkhead, 1981). Indeed, the longitudinal Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development revealed that young boys who had an incarcerated parent were nearly twice as likely to be incarcerated later in life than boys who were separated from parent for other reasons (Murray and Farrington, 2005).

Furthermore, studies focusing on child-parent separation through divorce suggest that children's problems did not result directly from the separation but rather from aspects related to it, such as conflict between parents, worsened economic situation and tensions in child-parent relationship

(Emery, 1999). These could be seen as the mediated effects of parental imprisonment, which although indirectly, strongly affect the level of impact on children. Other indirect influences involve new caretaking arrangements, quality of caretaker-prisoner relationship, changing school and moving to a new home, which all are likely to result in unstable environment for the child (Murray, 2005). Another important aspect is the children's concerns over the wellbeing of the parent because children's knowledge about their parent is mediated via the caretaker and many younger children are being lied to or only told half truth about the parent's whereabouts, which only adds to their confusion and insecurity (Poehlmann, 2005).

Not all children experience parental separation in the same way and their response to parental imprisonment depends on individual variables and moderating factors. Poehlmann's study (2005) on attachment security in children whose parent had been imprisoned concludes that older children and those who live in an environment with stable caretaking arrangement may be less affected than younger children. Similarly, Hanlon and colleagues (2005) concluded that supportive family environment protects children from destructive outcomes even if their parent was incarcerated substance user. Furthermore, Dallaire (2007b) argues that infants, school-aged children and adolescents face different risks owing to parental imprisonment. She suggests that infants and young children are particularly vulnerable to the direct effects of parental separation due to incarceration, whereas as schoolchildren and adolescents may suffer more from mediating imprisonment effects (Dallaire, 2007b). Moreover, the impact of parental incarceration depends on the quality of relationship the parent had with the

child before the separation. Murray (2005) suggests that the healthier the pre-existing parent-child relationship the harsher the impact of loss on children, whereas the imprisonment of an abusive parent may benefit the child. Factors like intelligence, character, ethnic background and sex may also play a role in how parental imprisonment affects children (Murray, 2005). Thus, individual characteristics and developmental stage of children have a big role in determining the effects of parental incarceration for an individual case. However, perhaps the most important factor could be whether it is the mother or a father who has been imprisoned, which will be explored in the next paragraph.

It is difficult to estimate the number of children affected by parental imprisonment with any precision due to a lack of data, however it is natural to assume that a large proportion of the majority male population are fathers. Studies that look at the effects of their incarceration paint quite a pessimistic picture. Findings from a longitudinal study in USA school students reveal that fathers' incarceration and poor education level sets in motion accumulation of disadvantages for the offspring, culminating in impoverished educational achievement, reduced political involvement and increased social exclusion (Foster and Hagan, 2007). Additional adversities include socialisation issues owing to father's absence due to imprisonment and reduced financial support for the child (Foster and Hagan, 2007). Other studies suggest that the absence of biological father, not necessarily due to incarceration, is linked to children's antisocial behaviour (Piffner et al, 2001). Interestingly, the incarceration of biological fathers is also linked with

higher rates of homelessness of daughters, as they may become victims of abuse of the new resident adult male (Foster and Hagan, 2007).

Although there are several negative themes, which arise as a result of fathers being imprisoned, the consequences of mothers being incarcerated are far worse and have a greater impact on the lives of their children; there are several reasons for this. First, the increasingly punitive attitude towards crime has increased the length of sentences for women and having dependent children is not considered a special circumstance for a more lenient sentence (Wildeman and Western, 2010). Second, there are fewer prisons for women, which means that they are sent farther away from their family than men, posing further obstacles to children visiting their mother (Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999). Third, prior to incarceration the majority of women who commit crimes raise their children without a reliable partner, increasing the likelihood of siblings being separated and children being placed under non-parental care, whereas in case of paternal incarceration, children remain under the care of the mother who helps to alleviate the stress of separation from father (Miller, 2006). Finally, adult children of incarcerated mothers had 2.5 times higher chances of being incarcerated than those of incarcerated fathers (Dallaire, 2007a). Thus, maternal incarceration seems to have a more severe effect on child-parent attachment and on children's development than paternal incarceration. Although the majority of the prison population is still men, the female proportion of the population is on the rise (Hanlon et al, 2007; HM Prison Service, 2011a) and so the effects of maternal imprisonment are becoming an urgent matter that affects not only individuals but society as whole,

raising the issue of whether mothers should have their parental responsibilities taken into account during sentencing and if a greater emphasis should be made to provide more local imprisonment to reduce the inequality experienced by convicted mothers and their families.

In contrast to the evidence already put forward, it is important to note that not all children with parents in prison become criminals and many become fully functioning, law abiding members of society, despite the risks associated with parental imprisonment. Nesmith and Ruhland (2008) interviewed 34 children (the majority of whom were African American boys) who had experienced parental incarceration to hear their side of the story. Opposing the widespread opinion that living in a bad neighbourhood and having criminal family members may somewhat normalise unlawful activity for a child and poor academic performance, most of the children in this study had no difficulties at school and were aware of the negative connotations attached to imprisonment and preferred to keep their parent's incarceration private. Children who knew others in their situation found it helpful to discuss their parent's imprisonment with these peers, yet the majority did not know anyone with an incarcerated parent. Although the sample of this study may not be representative of children from different ethnicities and gender, it does emphasise the importance of looking at the issue of parental incarceration from different angles. A lot of research on the effects of incarceration on families has relied on the reports of inmates. However, as they are separated from their family they may not give the most accurate account of the adversities suffered by their children and partners. Other flaws include small and unrepresentative sample sizes and the small number

of longitudinal studies concerned with this phenomenon. Also, some of the older research may be limited in their value today as the prison population may not reflect the general population, whereas nowadays the two have become more alike (Wildeman and Western, 2010).

Parental imprisonment poses difficulties not only for children but also for the new caretakers. They become the intermediaries of the communication, visitation and feelings between the child and the incarcerated parent (Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008). If the caretaker and imprisoned parent do not get along then the children are unable to visit their parent, as individuals under the age of 18 must to be accompanied by an adult during the prison visit (HM Prison Service, 2011b). In case of fathers' imprisonment the child will stay with the mother, and suffers less disturbance. Arditti (2003) and co-workers interviewed 56 caretakers visiting the prisoner, most of whom were either a female partners or wife to the inmate. The caretakers felt that it was them who were punished via the imprisonment of the father and expressed concern about their emotional and economic condition. Caretakers became single parents and often had to quit their job to take care of the children, making them dependent of the welfare system (Arditti et al, 2003). This illuminates the fact that incarceration has unwanted consequences not only for the prisoners' family but also for society. When the mother is imprisoned then grandparents are the most likely candidates who will resume care of children (Mumola, 2000). Although this arrangement is more desirable than alternatives, the grandparents who become the caretakers do so unofficially, limiting their access to external assistance and may be under extended financial, psychological and physical strain (Hanlon et al, 2007).

Grandparents face issues like depression, poor health and general limitations in daily routine caused by health problems (Fuller-Thomson and Minkler, 2000). In addition, the support systems that help caregivers cope with such demanding responsibility are often limited in eligibility and may be inaccessible to grandmothers because of their fragile health (Hanlon et al, 2007). Grandparents do not receive the same financial help and legal rights as foster parents do and they need to pass the CRB check by the social services to become official caretakers of the children (Collett, 2011).

The research on parental incarceration has important implications for public policy. Although research has done well to identify the most common problems of parental incarceration we are yet to learn the effects on groups with particular characteristics and finding willing participants may prove challenging (Miller, 2006). As parental incarceration exerts mainly negative outcomes on families and children, regular contact may alleviate the stress of separation and uncertainty about the parent. Unfortunately, prison visits are not always seen as a justifiable right of the family but rather as something that the prisoner must earn with good behaviour (Brooks-Gordon, 2003). A reduced number of visits is often related to longer distances between home and prison, high costs of travelling, unfriendly visitation rules, and costly phone calls (Murray, 2005). In the UK, a prisoner's family may apply for Assisted Prison Visits Scheme, which means that low-income families get some of their travel costs refunded (HM Prison Service, 2011b). In addition, there are lot of online resources for families about support groups, prison visits and procedures, yet not all families may have access to the Internet and some older family members may not know how to find these

resources. To help families cope with parental incarceration research proposes different support mechanisms like mentoring, church based services (Hanlon et al, 2007), peer-group support and education on prisons to alleviate the stress of uncertainty (Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008).

In conclusion, imprisonment has an impact beyond the sentenced individual, causing grief to all family members. The economic and emotional strain on family often takes a toll on the quality of the relationships within the family left behind and between the incarcerated individual and family. Close family-prisoner ties make an immense contribution to the post-release success of the offender (Visher and Travis, 2003) yet imprisonment breaks down a large number of families, decreasing the stability of home environment for children and increasing the likelihood of re-offence (Wildeman and Western, 2010). Incarceration has the strongest effect on children, diminishing their educational achievement, social capital and outlooks for future.

Governments should look more into alternatives to incarceration as increased prison population strips the funding from community services and translates into reduced opportunities for children with imprisoned parents and the disadvantages in their lives may lead them to become involved with criminal justice system. Thus, it is important to pay attention to the needs of prisoners' families because if they are ignored, their problems will be postponed and manifest in intergenerational patterns of prison population in the future.