

Maternal incarceration impact on parent-child relationships

Abstract

Female incarceration is rising steeply in Australia and other high-income countries. The majority of incarcerated women are mothers. Their children represent a particularly vulnerable group, often subject to adverse experiences due to their family's disadvantaged circumstances involving inadequate housing, food insecurity, poverty, poor health, a lack of personal safety due to violence and resulting trauma. This qualitative study explores parenting experiences of incarcerated mothers separated from their children. Interviews involved 65 mothers in three Australian prisons and 19 stakeholders providing correctional services and support for incarcerated women. Data were analysed using interpretive description. Mothers' accounts highlighted frustrations resulting from trying to maintain relationships with their children, often exacerbating their separation and compounding parenting difficulties. Two major themes emerged from the data: 'protecting their children' and 'at the mercy of the system'. Mothers described how they tried to protect their children from the consequences of their incarceration, yet many of the correctional system processes and procedures made it even harder to maintain connection. Incarcerated mothers need support in their parenting role. Ideally this support should commence during incarceration. Further, changes within prison routines could enhance mothers' efforts to keep in contact with their children, through visits and phone calls.

Keywords

10

, parenting support, vulnerability, qualitative approaches

Introduction

Incarceration of women is increasing in Australia and internationally (World Health Organisation 2020; Stack 2020). Many of these women have children who require care and supervision (ref). These children's circumstances frequently make them extremely vulnerable

(Dawson, Jackson & Nyamathi, 2012). All children need a trusting and secure maternal-child relationship, but this is critical for children of incarcerated mothers who need protection and support in the face of these added vulnerabilities (Harris, 2017). Yet, sound maternal-child relationships are extremely difficult or impossible to achieve when children experience long-term separated from their mother or main caregiver (Power et al. 2020). Being forbidden regular access visits with their child can disrupt the maternal-child relationship and undermine a child's sense of security and trust (Bowlby, 1973).

In Australia, 54% of Australian incarcerated women are identified as mothers (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2019). This compares with 80% of incarcerated women in the United States of America (Kajstura, 2019) and 57% of those in the UK (Epstein, 2014). Prior to their incarceration, many incarcerated women have a primary carer role for children, so their children are immediately and directly affected by their mother's incarceration (Harris, 2017). If a woman is a single parent, maternal incarceration can cause even more distress and upheaval to children (Harris, 2017), and can result in placement in out-of-home care with strangers, separation from siblings (Prison Reform Trust, 2017) or movement to other parts of the country to stay with relatives.

For many incarcerated women and their children, complex family histories and multiple vulnerabilities are the norm (Mollard & Brage Hudson, 2016). Children may encounter adverse childhood experiences that result in trauma and abuse (Fleming & Nurius, 2020; Harris, 2017; Turney, 2018). Many incarcerated women have a history of mental illness, illegal substance and/or alcohol addiction that has compromised their ability to parent safely (AIHW, 2019; Kajstura, 2019; Epstein, 2014). Health professionals are often unaware of these families' complex lives as women may be reluctant to reveal their history.

This paper is drawn from a larger study that sought to explore parenting education and support needs for incarcerated parents. Previous findings have pertained to paternal experiences (XXX blinded for peer review) and experiences of incarcerated Indigenous men (XXX, blinded for peer review), as well as the learning needs of both mothers and fathers in custody (XXX, blinded for peer review). In this paper, we explore the experiences of incarcerated mothers separated from their children. We identified two main themes: ‘protecting their children’, and ‘at the mercy of the system’.

Study Aim

This part of the research aimed to: explore the parenting experience of incarcerated mothers separated from their children.

Methods

An interpretive description method was used to explore experiences of incarcerated mothers, and of correctional staff and other stakeholders involved in providing parenting support for these women. Interpretive description aims to understand what we know and do not know using the collected data (Thorne, 2008). Interpretive description is useful for small scale, qualitative studies using subjective responses to answer clinical or practice relevant questions (Thorne, Reimer Kirkham & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004).

Ethics

Ethics approval was gained from the [University and approval number] and access approval was provided by [name of the correctional service]. Each potential participant

received written information and a verbal explanation of the study prior to signing the consent form. All interview data were de-identified by using pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from 65 incarcerated mothers in three women's prisons in New South Wales (NSW), Australia and from 19 correctional and not-for-profit organisation staff with experience in providing parenting support and addressing the needs of incarcerated parents more generally. Interview questions were developed based on consultation with correctional staff managers responsible for commissioning the research. The questions focused on the strengths of women's parenting strengths (see supplementary file). Probing questions further explored the women's experiences. Interviews were conducted by four of the authors (all female) and a female Aboriginal research assistant. Interviews were audio recorded with permission and transcribed.

During the interviews the mothers

Data Analysis

Interpretative description requires researchers to avoid pre-existing assumptions. It requires "good" questions to be asked of the data and to generate useful conceptualisations to explore the research question (Thorne et al., 2004). For example: did they inform their child about being in prison; reason for informing or not informing their child; what barriers were experienced by the mother to seeing or contacting their children? Analysis involved: data

comprehension, requiring reading and rereading of transcripts; meaning synthesis, looking for data linkages data; relationships theorisation; and data re-conceptualisation into findings (Thorne et al., 2004). The first and second authors coded the data and identified themes and sub-themes (see supplementary file coding process).

Trustworthiness and reflexivity

Ensuring trustworthiness was an important consideration during each research stage (Connelly 2016). Achieving reflexivity was a crucial process included throughout this research to ensure findings were not overly influenced by the researchers (Sandelowski 2000). Regular informal and formal discussion between researchers to discuss concerns raised during the development of the study, collection of data and during the analysis and reporting process (authors reference 2020)

Results

The sample

Sixty-five mothers aged between 21 and 58 (mean age 33 years) were interviewed. Interviews varied in length from 10-20 minutes for the mothers and 20-45 minutes for the stakeholders. Over three-quarters n=54 (83) were born in Australia and over half were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander women n=34 (52) or had Indigenous children n=1 (1.5%). One quarter n=15 (23%) had experienced the incarceration of at least one of their own parents during childhood. Two-thirds n=43 (66 %) had lived with their children prior to incarceration and eight (12) lived with one of their children in a mother/baby unit (prison nursery). Only 36 (56) had ever received a visit from their children. We did not collect demographic data from the stakeholders interviewed.

Our findings revealed the complexity and challenges women experienced while striving to parent while in custody. Two major themes were identified within the data: 'protecting their children' and 'at the mercy of the system'.

Protecting their children

This first theme explores why parents protect their children from knowing they are in prison. Just over half the sample (36 women) had told all their children that they were incarcerated; 17 had told none of their children while others revealed their imprisonment to some of their children, usually to older children. Two subthemes were identified in this theme and these are: too young to know and stigma of having a parent in prison.

Too young to know

In all instances the women's intent was to protect their children. A child's age often motivated mothers to withhold information.

They don't know I'm in prison. I don't want them to know. It's not good for them. They're too young to know (Susie).

Understanding how different children might or might not cope with the knowledge of their mother's incarceration, some women selectively told different children, depending on their age and perceived resilience. Their decision to tell could be further complicated by what was happening with other parent.

The oldest knows; the others don't. I don't want them to know ...They would struggle with the thought of it as their dad is in prison too. Our boy really struggles with being away from me and his dad. So, hearing that I was in prison he would really struggle. So it's better (Joan)

Withholding the truth, however, meant there was a danger that children would draw their own conclusions regarding their mother's absence.

Still it's upsetting, because I haven't turned up to visits. So they're probably thinking 'Mum doesn't love us anymore' (Joan).

Some mothers provided children with an alternative reason for their absence. However, this tactic was not always successful. As Kelly explained:

We told them I was away in hospital and then they came in and said 'Mummy, Daddy's gaol is just over there. Are you in gaol?' I was scared to tell them – I wanted to protect them (Kelly).

Even though her plan did not work her motivation was *to protect* her children. She did not tell them as she did not know how they would react to the news she was in prison.

Alternatively, other mothers told their children because they recognised the importance of being truthful. Georgie acknowledged the response she would receive from her son if given a false reason for her absence.

My oldest one is very aware of everything that goes on. I don't want to lie to him. If I lied to him then that's another thing that he would say to me – 'why did I say I was somewhere when I wasn't?' Or he'd overhear my Dad talking. I want to tell him the truth (Georgie).

Other mothers conceded that their children had been told because it was difficult to keep such a big secret when children are in contact with people likely to tell them. Others told their children to avoid their children feeling abandoned. The involuntary nature of separation was revealed.

I didn't want them to think that I was away from them by choice (Lucy).

Although not agreeing with withholding information from children, Facilitator 3 understood the reason why mothers tried to conceal the truth from their children. She highlighted the importance of respecting the mother's decision about disclosure and underlying motivation for the decision.

... I think you have to respect the parent's decision for wanting to make that decision because they might be wanting to make the best choice for their children (Facilitator3).

Stigma of prison

Custodial staff also justified mothers' actions of not telling their children, recognising that they desired to avoid their children experiencing stigma related to having a parent in prison:

what they are trying to do ... is avoid that stigma (Pyschologist2).

Several mothers explained their absence to their children, by claiming that they were 'at work'.

No, they don't know I'm in prison. That's my wish. Because of the prison - the stigma. The children think I am at work and that's the way I want it (Diane).

Having experienced stigma as a child when her own father was incarcerated, Kelly sought to spare her own children a similar fate:

I had to go through it with my dad [in prison] and I know what it's like (Kelly).

At the mercy of the system

Women can feel a sense of powerlessness within the correctional system. This is particularly pertinent for the mothers in this study given their awareness of the potential impact on children. Custodial officers and welfare agencies can place contact restrictions on them, leveraging their desire to see their children, as a form of punishment or coercion.

Restricted contact

Many incarcerated mothers are vulnerable to contact restrictions with their children. These barriers may include restricted contact times, lack of money or opportunity for phone calls, unpredictable prison lockdowns for security reasons or reduced access for visitors during public holidays. This situation was illustrated by a custodial staff member:

The inmates would generally curtail their extreme behaviour because the punishment was restriction to contact with families by removal of phone calls and visits (Not-for-profit Manager4).

Restrictions were placed on women regarding regular contact with their children were exacerbated by not having access to mobile phones, time constraints and the limit of one phone call per day. Inflexibility within prison meant women could not always coordinate their phone call with their children's availability: As Winnie explained:

...because of the phone situation. We're only allowed one phone call and you've got a time slot. If you get the answering machine, then it's tough luck. That is your call for the day. If one of them isn't home, it's tough luck. Their program changes all the time. I'm lucky to catch the older ones twice a week and the little one about three times. When we get back to the wing all the mothers want the 3.15 slot, because we get locked in at 3.30, but all our kids are at school. We're all trying to get that 3.15 to 3.30 time - very rarely. There's no roster because the girls change all the time (Winnie).

To be able to make a six-minute phone call, women must have money to pay for telephone calls and be available during the narrow period when phone calls are allowed. Many

women work in prison industries and receive a small wage deposited into an account they can use for a limited number of simple luxuries and phone calls. Some women receive financial assistance from their families. If neither of these options are available, the women must go without.

It's very hard and there are lots of problems. I can't get work so I can't make money [for phone calls]. If you're on remand, not many jobs available. Also your money takes time to follow you. I was at [another prison] but then transferred here. I don't get support from anyone on the outside, so I rely on working. You need money for everything (Sophie).

Visiting was often not allowed during special holidays such as Christmas and Easter. This is often due to a shortage of staff on these days, as many custodial officers are rostered off for public holidays.

We don't get Christmas visits. This year Boxing Day there were no visits – first time since I was in. Up until 2007 there were apparently Christmas Day visits. I can sort of understand that that would be difficult - and for the visitors. But Boxing Day – there was a sign up 'No visits on Boxing Day or Christmas Day' – what?! You look forward to it, the kids look forward to it. And that was not on. I believe that it was just cost [saving]. To my mind, that is their problem not our problem (Sally).

Being allowed to see their children and families through visits was perceived as leverage by correctional systems to control women's behaviours. Sally highlighted maintaining contact between parents and children as an important human rights issue. Critically, she linked maintaining the connection between children and their parents as reducing future community and relationship issues.

They ram down our throats that it is a privilege to have visits not a right. Under human rights – and it is sensible within the community. If you sever the relationship between inmates and their children, then in the longer run you have issues within the community, and the children eventually... (Sally).

Frequency of these visits were governed to some extent by the children's needs as they start to grow and have different social interests.

He visits every fortnight. He used to come weekly, but now he has other plans as he is nearly 16. Sometimes it's nice to have a weekend to myself after a week at work (Karen).

Karen made a final comment:

sometimes it's nice to have a weekend to myself after a week at work may be taken at face value that she is tired after a week at work.

A counter interpretation may be that she is trying to minimise her feelings of possible rejection.

Too far to come

The women's placement within the correctional system is not organised to ensure easy access to their families. Families and other carers face significant travel difficulties to enable visits from the children. Visits are often infrequent and can place financial and physical pressure on the children's carers.

I've seen them three or four times in 13 months. It's hard because my Dad is in [country town] and drives four hours to pick them up in [another country town], then drive another two hours to visit me for an hour. Then he turns around and drives back to my sister's. Then drives back to [country town] for an 18-hour shift ... My sister can't bring them because of her kids, and she doesn't drive (Ruth).

A handful of visits within a 13-month period seemed very limited for children to see their mother. Nevertheless, this was understandable given the arduous and expensive process for her family.

Other incarcerated mothers faced complications keeping contact with their children when the children lived overseas with extended family.

My children live with my parents in [country] and can't visit. I did try last year and year before for [non-profit organisation] with video-link overseas. The [General Manager] says they couldn't make it happen, because it was very expensive (Skye).

Unfortunately, Skye's efforts to make contact with her children were not allowed. This lack of contact remained a common concern for the mothers due to inadequate money to afford telephone calls or stamps for letters and limited support to make international telephone or video calls.

Lack of access

Women's access to visits from their children can be limited or stopped depending on the women's histories and behaviour while in prison. The state government welfare agency and the justice system are arbiters of whether a parent has access to their child and conditions of that access. They also manage the state foster care system. As Jenny shared:

The older two are in foster care and don't visit...The baby was taken away after one hour. [welfare agency] have brought her to visit three or four times since she was born. No other contact (Jenny).

At the time of the interview, Jenny's baby was one year old. She was deeply distressed at having such a short time to be with her after birth and then so few visits in the following year.

Coordinating welfare agencies and working within rules and constraints of prison life could be frustrating for women trying to see their children. Face-to-face visits are preferable

for young children as they are often unable to make connections between a voice on the telephone and their mother.

I've had other difficulties keeping in touch, due to restriction of visits [by welfare agency]. Finding it difficult to make phone contact – have to explain the situation to every officer to arrange the phone call. Officers are not always helpful (Caroline).

Foster parents have informal power that allows them to make day-to-day decisions about whether a child can visit their parent regardless of court decisions, as illustrated by a custodial staff member:

...a lot of foster carers, depending on their motivation, they can really stop the kids going. You know all they have to say is 'the kid was upset or came home crying' or you know they can even make it up and everything stops – and the actual visit was really good. So it's how the foster carers [present it] (Manager5).

According to the staff member, foster carers can easily justify why they are not bringing children to visit. However, the explanation given about previous visits by the carer may not match the observation of the custodial staff. Even when a court order is in place to ensure that children are allowed to visit, regular visits may be kept to a minimum by the carers' stated difficulties:

I find that there can be situations where there are court orders in place and you have to fight other systems to try and gain minimum access to children but if there's no motivation on the part of the carers or the agency ... who are responsible for the out-of-home care of the children, it's almost impossible to make that happen, apart from the parent lodging applications with the court to have a review of the orders. I don't know that there's any other method of having them enforced. It takes a lot of goodwill for those types of orders to be meaningful (Welfare worker6).

Parents have the option to apply to the court for a review, however, it is time consuming and difficult without assistance from the custodial staff. The welfare worker's final statement highlights the need for:

... goodwill for those types of orders to be meaningful (Welfare worker6)

To ensure these regular visits requires an effort by staff and carers. If unsuccessful mothers and their children are placed in powerless positions.

Unfortunately, some women are unable to provide a stable, nurturing and safe environment for their children even when not in prison. Melissa, who was herself cared for by a state welfare agency spoke of being considered an unplaceable child and the difficulties she had experienced with the agency.

[welfare agency] don't facilitate anything. I spent three months arguing with them about bringing the children to visit – and distance grows between a parent and child in that time. Then [welfare agency] argue that because I haven't had contact with them for such a long period, they're not facilitating visits on the outside. I've gone four years without seeing my two older children. They use the fact that I keep coming back to prison as a reason for not facilitating visits because it is an unstable amount of contact. But it could be stable if they did what they do for other people. Then I end up in prison for attacking a case worker because they want to play games with my kids. What parent on the face of the earth would not react in a violent or aggressive manner? (Melissa)

This quote suggests Melissa has little support from authorities due to the minimal contact she had with her children when living in the community and her resulting recidivism. Her aggression demonstrated a lack of anger control even though she believed her actions were justified. This would have further reduced the support for her to have contact with her children.

While several mothers told stories about their lack of contact with their children, others described the support they had received from the welfare agency.

[welfare agency] have organised prison visits. All of them [my children] come every two weeks. They've been supportive (Mae)

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the parenting experience of incarcerated mothers separated from their children. Several issues and concerns were raised by the mothers as they tried to protect their children from the stigma of having an incarcerated mother and navigate the system to maintain contact with their children. While some mothers used their own experience of being a child of an incarcerated parent and the need to build a trusting relationship by being honest about their situation. A major concern was the lack of access they had with their children.

Children of incarcerated mothers are at risk because of institutional policies that can breach their human rights; for example, when visitation policies are developed the needs of children are often ignored (Boudin, 2013). These rights are identified by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989: page1) and should be a primary consideration when caring for children. For children with an incarcerated mother, of critical importance are Article 7 (a child had the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents) and Article 9 (children should not be separated from their parents unless it is for their own good; for example, if a parent is mistreating or neglecting a child. Children whose parents have separated have the right to stay in contact with both parents, unless this might harm the child). For mothers, separation from their children is traumatic, especially if visits are denied or the children are unable to visit because of caregiving arrangements. This enforced separation is often interpreted by the mothers as an additional unfair punishment (Scotti 2020).

Maternal incarceration threatens the child's sense of security and trust due to the enforced separation from their mother and often unstable caregiving arrangements (Epstein,

2014). Yet there is a need to balance these rights with the severity of the mother's crime and security within the prison (Epstein, 2014).

Children of incarcerated mothers have often faced significant adverse childhood experiences, including violence exposure, parental substance problems, neglect (Turney, 2018) and removal into care prior to or at the time of incarceration (Ocen, 2018). Nevertheless, our study found that these mothers maintain hope that they will be reunited with their children after release from prison. At times participants spoke of their frustration with the correctional and child welfare systems that they believed were not supportive of their need to have regular contact with their children.

Our research identified the intense difficulties of being an incarcerated mother. Parenting is challenging for women whose lives may involve poverty, mental or physical illness, abuse, addiction or crime (Stone, Liddell & Martinovic 2017). The experience of incarceration exacerbates these difficulties frequently resulting in recidivism (Stone et al., 2017). In particular, these women highlighted their concerns about their children learning of their mother's incarceration and the constraints of the correctional system that restricted contact with their children.

Women in this study differed about telling their children about their incarceration. Some were concerned that the children were too young to know or understand the concept of incarceration and what it meant for their mothers. Other mothers, especially with older children, were wary of lying to their child about their whereabouts. A major concern by mothers was their child's distress when the truth of their incarceration was exposed resulting in a 'spoilt identity' for the child (Luther 2016), further eroding trust in their mother.

The stigma attached to having an incarcerated parent (Stone et al., 2017) can limit a child's learning and social interactions (Turney & Goodsell, 2018). Living in a large city provides some protection for children but for other children living in a small country town where the prison is a major employer increases the risk of people knowing that a child has a parent inside. Several mothers whose own parent/s had been incarcerated experienced this stigma as children and wished to spare their own children.

A major concern for participants was the restricted contact with their children, by phone or in person. Women spoke of this as a means of controlling their behaviour. While this may be an effective mechanism to ensure order within the prison, it does not consider the child's need for maternal contact and the impact on the emotional wellbeing of the child (Aiello & McCorkel, 2018). The maintenance of regular communication and physical contact between mother and child is identified as best child welfare practice (Harris, 2017).

The women's ability to have visits or phone contact with their children was limited by carers' willingness to bring children to the prison or by the cost and timing of phone calls. Women can be in a prison a significant distance from where her children are residing or re-located with minimal notice, compounding the difficulty of being separated from their children. Carers often did not bring the children for visits due to the distance to the prison and resulting financial cost. This economic disadvantage creates further barriers for maintenance of the relationship between mothers and children (Rubenstein, Toman & Cochran, 2019). Development of a trusting secure relationship can significantly reduce the chances of continuance of intergenerational cycles of abuse and violence (Lewing et al., 2018).

Videoconferencing is supplementing face-to-face visits in some countries to increase access (McLeod & Bonsu, 2018; Cramer et al., 2017).

Implications for policy and practice

Although correctional programs and support can assist mothers while in prison to enhance their parenting knowledge and skills (xxx blinded for review xxx), a greater commitment is necessary to assist women to transition back into the community and their role as mothers. Poverty, isolation, homelessness, violence and discrimination severely limit a woman's chances of developing the necessary qualities for successful mothering (Marcellus, 2017). Unless women can demonstrate that they can provide their children with a safe emotional and physical environment it is unlikely that they will regain custody of their child.

Probably little can be done to reduce the stigma of maternal incarceration or to ease women's wariness about telling their children the truth about their whereabouts. However, some correctional practices and routines severely impact women's capacity to maintain contact with their children, such as cancelling family visits or forbidding parents' access to telephones at times when children have returned home from school. There may be scope to address these regulations to support maternal-child relationship building, without undermining overall prison security.

A review of policies is needed to ameliorate harmful effects of maternal incarceration on children (Dawson, Brooks, Carter, Larman & Jackson 2013). Of critical importance is an increase in meaningful access between mothers and their children, whenever possible, by allowing children to live with their mothers in specially developed mother-child units or having regular extended visitation in child friendly areas (Paynter, Jefferies, McKibbon, Martin-Misener & Iftene 2020). This is a necessary step to fulfil the foundational principle of having the right to know and be cared for by their parent; a CRC foundational principle (Scotti 2020)

Limitations

This qualitative study included a self-selected sample of incarcerated mothers and stakeholders. The mothers were located at only three women's prisons in one state of Australia, potentially limiting the generalisability of our findings. Many incarcerated mothers have long-standing and complicated relationships with child welfare agencies and other authorities especially if concerned about reunification (Cooper-Sadlo, Mancini, Meyer & Chou 2019), potentially leaving them reluctant to talk about their experiences. However, women in this study participated willingly and candidly.

Data for this study was collected in 2015-2016 there will have been some changes to correctional services management of incarcerated mothers and their children. With the onset of COVID-19 pandemic video visits have been instigated (Corrective Services NSW, 2020). These video visits while not ideal should increase accessibility for children to their mothers. Managing the complexity of a correctional services system can make it difficult to change policies and procedure.

We did not ask the women about reasons for their incarceration. Our ability to identify if incarceration impacted maternal child relationships is limited.

Conclusion

This study has explored some of the experiences of mothers in NSW prisons. Incarceration exacerbates the parenting difficulties of these mothers and hampers the development of critical mother-child relationships increasing hardship and pain. Maternal incarceration has long-reaching consequences for children, particularly for their social and emotional development and, ultimately, their capacity to become effective parents themselves.

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