

Angela Dawson (Corresponding author), BA Hons., PhD, Research Fellow, Faculty of Health, University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. Email: angela.dawson@uts.edu.au

Lorna Brookes BA Hons., PgDip., MSc, University of Central Lancashire, United Kingdom. lorna.brookes@pss.org.uk

Bernie Carter PhD, RSCN, Professor of Children's Nursing, University of Central Lancashire, United Kingdom Email: bcarter@uclan.ac.uk

Gloria Larman B.A., Chief Executive Officer, SHINE for Kids, P.O. Box 67, Ermington, New South Wales, Australia. Email: glarman@shineforkids.org.au

Debra Jackson RN, PhD, Professor, Faculty of Health, University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. Email: debra.jackson@uts.edu.au

TITLE: Stigma, health and incarceration: Turning the tide for children with a parent in prison

Children affected by parental imprisonment are vulnerable to a range of sub-optimal health and social outcomes. The incarceration of a parent has a profound effect on children who may already have 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 parents 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 spaces 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 UK 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".

Policy makers 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 which 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 resources and mediate the negative effects of imprisonment on children and families (Comfort et al., 2011).

References

- Boudin C. (2011) Children of Incarcerated Parents: the Child's Constitutional Right to the Family Relationship. *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology* 101: 77-118.
- Comfort M, Nurse AM, McKay T, et al. (2011) Taking children into account. *Criminology & Public Policy* 10: 839-850.
- Dawson A, Jackson D and Nyamathi A. (2012) Children of incarcerated parents: Insights to addressing a growing public health concern in Australia. *Children and Youth Services Review* 34: 2433-2441.
- Geller A, Cooper C, Garfinkel I, et al. (2012) Beyond Absenteeism: Father Incarceration and Child Development. *Demography* 49: 49-76.
- Kobak R and Madsen S. (2008) Disruptions in attachment bonds: Implications for theory, research, and clinical intervention. In: Cassidy J, Shaver, P. R. (ed) *Handbook of attachment Theory, research, and clinical applications*. New York: Guilford, 23-47.
- Manning R. (2011) Punishing the Innocent: Children of Incarcerated and Detained Parents. *Criminal Justice Ethics* 30: 267.

- Murray J and Farrington DP. (2008) The effects of parental imprisonment on children. 133-206.
- Murray J, Farrington DP and Sekol I. (2012) Children's antisocial behavior, mental health, drug use, and educational performance after parental incarceration: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin* 138: 175-210.
- Phillips S and Gates T. (2011) A Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Stigmatization of Children of Incarcerated Parents. *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 20: 286-294.
- Quinn D and Chaudoir S. (2009) Living with a concealable stigmatized identity: The impact of anticipated stigma, centrality, salience, and cultural stigma on psychological distress and health. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 97: 634-651
- Seymour C. (1998) Children with parents in prison: child welfare policy, program, and practice issues. *Child Welfare* 77: 469-493.
- Shlafer RJ and Poehlmann J. (2010) Attachment and caregiving relationships in families affected by parental incarceration. *Attachment & Human Development* 12: 395-415.
- Trice A and Brewster J. (2004) The effects of maternal incarceration on adolescent children. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology* 19: 27-35.
- Wakefield S and Wildeman C. (2011) Mass imprisonment and racial disparities in childhood behavioral problems. *Criminology & Public Policy* 10: 793-817.