

Bars that Cause Scars

FACT SHEET



A fact sheet about Children with Justice Involved Parents

Any kind of major disruption in the family home can cause confusion and trauma for children, including from interruptions arising from the arrest and incarceration of a parent. This fact sheet provides a summary of some of the challenges children endure and offers suggestions for service providers and criminal justice professionals to help alleviate this problem. The information has been summarized from McCormick, Millar and Paddock's recent report *In the Best Interests of the Child: Strategies for Recognising and Supporting Canada's At-Risk Population of Children with Incarcerated Parents*.

Some major obstacles for children who endure disruption due to parental involvement in the justice system arise from: child welfare and protection issues; developmental challenges including trauma; relationship strain between parent and child; educational set-backs; the effects of stigma; and increased risk for future criminal justice system contact. These risks are further heightened for children who experience the arrest and incarceration of their mothers.

Child Welfare and Protection Issues

The arrest and incarceration of parents can raise issues regarding the family's ability to care for children. Some experiences include:

- Financial strain on the caregiver due to the additional resource need
- Insufficient time for the parent to make appropriate caregiving arrangements upon arrest
- Use of informal family arrangements even if the caregiver is not appropriate (elderly, unsafe)
- Placement of the child in foster care (making return of child to the incarcerated parent more difficult)

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Developmental Challenges (Including Trauma)

Children separated from parents due to incarceration face disruptions to their healthy development, regardless of their age at separation. Based on age, some of these challenges include:

- Separation from mother at infancy can jeopardize the bond formed during breastfeeding, affecting future ability to form healthy bonds and relationships;
- Toddlers may experience developmental regression, resulting in aggressive behaviours as an outlet for negative emotions;
- Both infants and toddlers have difficulty visiting parent(s) during incarceration and communicating effectively
- Primary school children experience similar consequences as toddlers, and often will also experience the negative consequences of suppressing information or emotions due to a desire to 'fit in' with their peer group
- Adolescent separation from a parent often results in more anger than confusion about the situation, and may result in withdrawal from others and suppression of emotions which contributes to high risk, antisocial and sometimes criminal activity
- Teens may also need to take on adult responsibilities increasing risk of school drop-out from increased stress and contributing to risky behaviours as a coping mechanism
- Any child is likely to experience psychological and emotional trauma after parental separation, however this may be offset by the strength of the parent-child bond and other positive aspects of the child's home-life

Strained Relationships between Incarcerated Parent and Child

Studies have shown that regular contact between parents and children facilitates reintegration and reduces the risk of reoffending.

- Caregivers may inadvertently negatively affect the parent-child relationship by refusing to talk about parents' situation or by criticizing parents' actions
- If the child was victimized by the parent, it is not necessarily in the child's best interest to maintain contact with the parent
- It is important to remember that caregivers have the ability to control the extent to which a child may be able to visit a parent during incarceration, or determine how much information the child receives about their parent's current status within the system

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School Challenges

Separation from a parent may result in numerous education challenges for a child.

- There is no process for teachers to be alerted of these types of situations, and there is very little training provided to guide appropriate responses
- Changing schools due to caregiver changes can disrupt teacher-child relationships
- The child may be unable to connect with friends or adults at new schools, resulting in isolation and lack of support
- This may result in poor attendance, poor academics, and increased 'acting out'
- Foster children are at even higher risk due to increased changes in the home

Effects of Stigma on the Child, Parent and Family

Stigma is a common source of strain for children due to their parent's involvement with the justice system:

- Children may experience labelling and stigma from peers, as well as unintentional stereotyping by professionals (teachers, criminal justice professionals, social workers, neighbourhood parents)
- The family/caregiver may be embarrassed resulting in withheld or improper information sharing with schools or in the community
- These experiences may result in the child enduring fear and shame; the child may not feel comfortable accessing resources

Risk of Future Criminal Justice System Contact

Studies have shown a correlation between incarceration of a parent and future criminal/deviant behaviour of their children. This correlation is due to the fact that:

- Children are more likely to engage in risky, antisocial and criminal behaviours as a coping mechanism for the turmoil they endure
- In one Canadian study, 40 provincially incarcerated women reported that half of their adolescent children had been in youth custody
- Second generation inmates self-reported poorer adjustment and higher prevalence for violence, anger and institutional misconduct

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Children with Incarcerated Mothers

Children with incarcerated mothers are often at higher risk than those with incarcerated fathers, often because the mother is the primary caregiver and her incarceration may cause greater disruption upon separation.

- These child(ren) are more likely to be placed in foster care (especially if inadequate time to arrange for alternative custody)
- Due to lack of time given to arrange appropriate care the child may be placed in a home that is unsafe or unable to support child
- Even if the child is not later involved in the criminal justice system, children that have been placed in foster care are at higher risk for dropping out, homelessness, developing mental health issues and antisocial behaviour

Although the risk factors are numerous for children with justice-involved parents, there is very little programming in Canada for this vulnerable population. Programs that are available are often run by non-profit organizations that receive unstable sources of funding and have often not been evaluated for effectiveness. Few programs assist in the reintegration of the parent into the family home and community after release. Support during reintegration is imperative for repairing relationships and addressing traumas that will reduce the likelihood of parental reoffending and offending behaviours of children.

Some recommendations include:

1. Early forms of information sharing between police, social workers, non-profit
2. Better protocols for placement decision to ensure safety and happy living arrangements
3. Awareness, education, and training for professionals and for children and care providers
4. Amendments to current sentencing guidelines and policy to reduce separation
5. Communication and visitation programs for parents and children
6. Evaluation of programs offered to children with parents in the criminal justice system

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