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Incarceration Effects on Children and Families

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INCARCERATION EFFECTS ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Sharon Rose
May 2023

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ABSTRACT

Children of incarcerated parents have been found to experience long-term trauma as an effect of parental incarceration. There is little information regarding resources and programs available to these children to mitigate these issues. This study aims to identify recurring themes experienced by children and families separated by incarceration which cause negative long-term issues. The study will identify these overlaps and identify plans that can be implemented by social service agencies to alleviate and diminish the rates at which children are affected by incarceration. The researcher will conduct individual interviews with participants to complete an exploratory cross-sectional study. Data gathered from the interviews will be transcribed and analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my family who have encouraged me throughout my academic career. It is also dedicated to my friends new and old who have been there to hold me strong during some emotionally tolling moments that occurred while I completed this program.

All of you love and support did not go unnoticed, and it is extremely appreciated. Thank you for being such amazing people.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Formulation

Human interaction and connections are some of the most important components of any person's life, but this is especially true for children. Unlike other species, humans are not born with the ability to survive alone and rely heavily on their caregivers to maneuver through life. The first two years of life are some of the most crucial in children's growth, emotional development, and cognitive development (Prioreshi et.al., 2020). This development not only comes from proper access to necessities such as food and water but also the interaction between parent(s) and child(ren). Unfortunately, within the United States many children lose a parent, or both, to incarceration, and depending on the circumstances social service agencies, such as Child Protection Services, may intervene to ensure the child is safe and taken care of.

Throughout various studies numbers of children affected by parental incarceration vary but Murphy and Cooper (2015) determined the underestimated number is now five million children. These numbers are disproportionate within different ethnic groups, geographical areas, and lower economic statuses as these groups are most affected (Murphy & Cooper, 2015). The same disproportionality is also reflected in the populations of incarcerated peoples which is often described as "distinctly American" (Arditti & Johnson, 2020).

Incarceration is a macro-level problem within the United States. Studies found that 2.3 million out of the 328.2 million people residing within the United States are incarcerated (Worley, 2018). Out of every 100,000 incarcerated individuals, African Americans accounted for 1,200, Hispanics accounted for 700, and Whites 300 (Carson, 2020). It is difficult to determine the number of children these incarcerated individuals have due as previously mentioned but the removal of a parent due to incarceration leads to shifts in family dynamics that can cause negative effects. The removal of a parent leaves the alternate parent without support, including the financial support role. The children are also forced to experience a loss that is often stigmatized by society causing trauma (Kautz, 2017).

These traumas and stressors often require intervention (preferably preemptive) to help the child develop coping mechanisms and build a support system while the parental figure is gone, but to also ensure the safety of the children when and if the parental figure returns (Fite et.al, 2012; Kautz, 2017; Phillips et.al 2002). Although the return of the parental figure can bring relief it, can also add to the stress. The parental figure who remained in the home may not be willing or able to release the “head of household” role due to fear of repeated loss (Kautz, 2017; Kjellstrand, 2017). Children may experience residual feelings that cause conflict between them and the returning parent. Additionally, children may show delinquent behaviors of their own (Shaw, 2014). If these changes become overpowering within the families, it can lead to safety concerns

for the children involved. Parental figures may lash out against the other parent or the child(ren). These situations can lead to abuse or neglect occurring thus requiring interventions from social services, or Children Protection Services. Social service providers, such as social workers, who begin working with the family use their knowledge and experience to service the family to create a stable and safe environment for the child(ren) to develop and thrive in. Unfortunately, by the time social services providers become involved with families facing parental incarceration abuse and/or neglect has already occurred.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine the common areas which lack interventions for families facing parental incarceration and determine action social service providers assist. Incarceration of a parent is a macro-level issue that trickles down to affect the mezzo and micro levels of society. This study will focus on the micro-level of effects in hopes of bringing attention to the issue and identifying changes that could aid in alleviating the effects. Those most affected by incarceration are children who lose a parent to incarceration. These children can belong to a variety of cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic statuses of society.

The study will first identify the stressors caused by parental incarceration. This will aid in highlighting the common issues faced by parents and children when incarceration occurs and the short- and long-term effects on children and

their families. In doing so, this study will find areas in which social service agencies and providers can intervene.

A variety of one-on-one interviews will be conducted with formally incarcerated individuals and now adult children who experienced parental incarceration. Their experiences will highlight components of incarceration that caused stress which may have led to long-term psychological and/or emotional traumas. It will also allow the study to determine the kinds of programs and accommodation already available to families to ensure their connections are not lost and highlight areas that are lacking. By identifying these areas, the study will emphasize the possibility of program and service development. By developing programs and services that can be practiced for families facing parental incarceration the stressors can be lessened in turn also lowering the rate at which children face trauma.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

The National Association of Social Work provides a code of ethics to ensure individuals and families are treated with respect and given the power of self-determination (Workers, 2008). The code of ethics establishes a set of ethical standards that are to be used to guide social work practice. For families and children, the social worker must abide by the ethics when determining if a household/family is safe for the child(ren). The study aims to find ways in which social workers could apply these ethics in assisting children facing parental incarceration. Due to incarceration children face a variety of traumas which

places them at higher risks of being abused or neglected as well as a loss of support (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010, Kautz, 2017, Phillips et.al, 2002; Turney, 2017). Social work practitioners can step in and help mitigate the traumas and likelihood of abuse (Turney, 2017). Social workers would gain knowledge in the additional boundaries caused by incarceration and better form case plans to work with the family and children. Having more adaptive case plans would help increase the chances of reunification, strengthen family bonds, and lessen the chances of the children being permanently removed from their parents (D'Andrade & Valdez, 2012; Kjellstrand, 2017).

The vast effects of incarceration on families create opportunities for social workers to help maintain, rebuild, and restrengthen the family. Families change structure, attitudes, and can begin to have conflict leading to concerns of safety and overall wellbeing for children. This study seeks to determine the extent to which partial separation of a child and parent/caregiver due to incarceration affects families and how the social work role can assist in restrengthening a family following the traumatic event. What are the stressors and traumas associated with parental incarceration and the long-term effects on children and how can social workers help alleviate these stressors?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter of the study will provide information regarding the population size of incarcerated people and the approximate number of children belonging to this population. Additionally, this section will present information previously found regarding traumas and stressors faced by children of incarcerated parents and the effects of these stressors. Lastly, the poor outcome of families who receive services from public welfare agencies due to parental incarceration will also be covered in this section

Stressors and Effects of Parental Incarceration on Children and Families

As many as 2.3 million out of the 328.2 million people within the United States are currently incarcerated within a jail or prison (Worley, 2018). There is not an accurate number regarding the number of children affected by parental incarceration, but various estimates determined there are millions (Gaston, 2016; Kjellstrand, 2017; Murphy & Cooper, 2015; Turney, 2017). Children of incarcerated parents face traumas that cause long-term effects including an increase in medical issues, mental health needs, a shift in family structure and relationships, and juvenile incarceration.

Long Term Medical Effects

Although parental incarceration is not the sole cause of long-term medical needs for children it is a contributing factor. Children with at least one incarcerated parent face higher mortality rates and face higher chances of dealing with multiple medical conditions than children who do not face parental incarceration (Turney, 2020). These conditions range from high cholesterol, STDs, educational disabilities, developmental disabilities, and asthma at a rate of up to 60% higher than other children (Turney, 2020).

These disparities may be due to various reasons including higher rates of financial struggles (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010). Finances can limit access to regular medical treatments or continuous case planning with a medical professional. Children's overall health is also affected by heightened levels of stress within the household. Stress is one of the primary causes that lead to health issues such as high blood pressure and long-term mental health needs (Aaron and Dallaire, 2010). Overall, the studies were able to address the issues regarding long-term health and highlighted where the issues stemmed from.

Mental Health Needs. Various studies conducted on children of incarcerated parents found that long-term mental health issues are of high concern for these children. As previously mentioned, minority groups are incarcerated at higher rates meaning that children belonging to non-white ethnic groups are often experienced higher rates of emotional and behavioral issues

(Gaston, 2016; Phillips et.al, 2002). Children with incarcerated parents are subjected to higher adversity and other stressful conditions (Phillips et.al, 2002).

Children with incarcerated parents are more likely to have outbursts in behavior, higher school dropout rates, and delinquency. Outbursts in behavior are due to various factors including high-stress situations, loss of a support system, and higher levels of conflict (Phillips et.al, 2002). These children also suffer higher levels of depression (23%) as compared to children who do not have an incarcerated parent (9%) (Aaron and Dallaire, 2010; Phillips et.al, 2002). These children often have limited access to health insurance creating a barrier in access to mental health services. Without access to mental health services, these children are at higher risk of showing depressive behaviors and symptoms in adulthood meaning there are long-term adverse effects caused by parental incarceration (Gaston, 2016; Turney, 2017).

Family Structures and Relationships

The family unit plays an extremely important role in the proper development of a child as it provides safety, education, and emotional support for children. When one is removed, the family faces turmoil which can require outside interventions. Incarceration leads to additional stress over finances, lack of support, and higher levels of conflict which affect the children (Aaron and Dallaire, 2010). Children may develop feelings of abandonment resulting in a need to seek acceptance from others outside of the immediate family (Fite et.al, 2012; Kautz, 2017). Children seek out validity and approval from other people

even from those who may not have their best interest in mind. This becomes a factor that can increase their chances of facing neglect or abuse.

Children facing parental incarceration are often forced into becoming self-reliant and even isolate themselves. Self-reliance becomes a form of protection as they seek acceptance from others while withholding information regarding their parents due to fear of being an outcast (Kautz, 2017). Children are often afraid of other children and people discovering their situation, so they opt to keep quiet and away from others. Children may also begin to cut off pre-existing friendships as a form of protection.

This isolation is also increased due to the limitations set by the jail and prison systems regarding contact. The incarcerated parent can generally only have contact via telephone, mail, and limited in-person visits. Visitations are limited by availability, jail and prison regulation, and the willingness of the children to visit (D'Andrade & Valdez, 2012). Even when the child is willing to visit at any given time the facility where the parent is can go into a lockdown state causing yet another boundary for contact.

Children of incarcerated parents often experience a variety of emotions regarding their parents which causes strains in the relationship (Kautz 2017) which can increase exponentially when the parent returns home. The type and quality of contact with the incarcerated parent play a significant role for the children as the dynamic of the family unit shifts (Kautz, 2017). The use of counseling services assists in developing the child's resiliency and provides a

more stable environment to allow a smoother transition for when the parent returns (Kjellstrand, 2017). This is an effect of bonds being maintained even through the stress of separation but as previously mentioned there is no guarantee the family will reunite seamlessly.

Children may reject the parent thus causing conflicts in the home (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010). The parent may feel rejected by their child who no longer looks to them for guidance. Depending on the parenting style this may lead to increased use in corporal punishment or emotional abuse by the parent. When this occurs social service agencies may be called in to intervene, adding yet another stressor on the family.

Juvenile Delinquency

Due to the number of stressors and trauma experienced by children of incarcerated parents they have higher rates of delinquency and mental health issues (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010; Fite et.al, 2012; Kautz, 2017). The lack of mental health services greatly impacts the likelihood of delinquency throughout the child's life. Studies focused primarily on the likelihood of juvenile delinquency but did not address the outcome of other children who did not participate in delinquent behaviors. Phillips et.al (2002) also noted there are various limitations in determining juvenile delinquency. These include the age at which the parent was incarcerated, the length of incarceration, and the strength in the relationship between child and parent. Some mitigating factors have been identified but often this is where research is lacking (Kautz, 2017).

Social Service Involvement

Reunification After Incarceration

Studies often focused on stressors that surround the process of reunification between incarcerated parents and their children (Arditti and Johnson, 2020; D'Andrade and Valdez, 2012; and Phillips et.al, 2002). These factors included regular visitation, contact between parent and child, the existence of abuse or neglect in the home, and involvement of social services. Studies determined that families who endured parental incarceration following a case plan, whether created by social service agencies or counselors, still faced a lower chance of a positive and successful reunification than those who didn't (Arditti, 2020; D'Andrade & Valdez, 2012). This was due to the limitation and regulation of visitation and the inability of the incarcerated parent to follow the case plans.

As both child protection services and the incarceration system are government-run there is a need for cooperation. Both systems can create programs and resources to assist families such as social services agencies dedicating time to supervise visits between children and their incarcerated parents. Social service providers can also use alternative case plans that better serve these families.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Studies on parental incarceration and the effects on children follow a family resilience perspective and conflict perspective. Multiple studies highlighted

the disproportionality of people incarcerated within the United States. Conflict theory states that social order is maintained by the control of power being held by one the few rather than by all in a consensus. This is seen as the over-representation of children of minority ethnic groups having more exposure to incarcerated parents (Carson, 2020; Murphy & Cooper, 2015; Worley & Worley, 2018). These studies also demonstrated how minority groups often serve longer sentences than those who are not of ethnic backgrounds (Geller, 2013). These serve as examples of how power held by the few affects those in society who are deemed as less worthy of power and have limited access to resources that would aid them in maintaining their freedoms.

The family resilience perspective was also used throughout various studies. Arditti & Johnson (2020) best explained the theory in their study as the focus on a family's ability to persevere through trauma. King & Delgado (2020) used the same family resiliency theory and found that the lack of support leads to issues of unresolved grief from the loss of a parent due to incarceration. The theory focuses on the necessity of social supports and building strength to help alleviate the stressors brought about during challenging times. Both studies found that families, especially the children of incarcerated parents, face higher chances for dealing with the previously mentioned issues (mental health issues, delinquency, long-term medical issues) without proper supports to deal with the separation.

This study hopes to find ways in which social service providers can mitigate the traumas and stressors children of incarcerated parents face. Social services agencies can adapt to a variety of settings, including jail and prisons, which could assist in mitigating the trauma of parental incarceration. Through interviews, the study aims to determine the areas in which families need more support during their separation and identify the types of supports already in place for the incarcerated parent and their children. The study would have limitations regarding the applicability of its findings. This is due to the restrictions set by different incarceration settings.

Summary

Separation due to parental incarceration has negative effects on children and their development. There are few interventions in place to help children and their families cope with this loss which leads to higher levels of mental health needs, juvenile delinquency, and long-term medical issues. Public social service agencies often become involved with these families but do not lessen these negative effects. There is a need for a change in casework to aid children's resiliency during these stressful incidents. Social services can also work with jails and prisons to ensure contact with the incarcerated parent, when appropriate, is maintained to keep a healthy relationship. These will aid in the healthy growth and development of children who face parental incarceration.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This chapter outlines the methods and procedures taken to determine the long-term effects of parental incarceration on children. It sought to find the overlapping experiences within a group of individuals who provide services to children and families facing parental incarceration. The sections to follow explain the study design, sampling, data collection and instruments, analysis of data, and how the participants' identifiable information will be protected.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to identify the long-term effects affecting individuals who experienced parental incarceration, the interventions that were put into place for them or lack thereof and determine how often a public welfare agency provided services. This study used a qualitative method as there is a need for personal experiences to describe how parental incarceration affects children and families. Although surveys could be used, it is important to ask open-ended questions of the participants.

Various studies focused only on the effects of parental incarceration. This study aimed to find the area in which public social service agencies can aid children from a young age to deter the long-term effects of parental incarceration. This study allowed for participants to use their personal experiences to express

how the incarceration system affected the lives of the children and families separated from a parent due to incarceration. This information allowed the researcher to find overlaps and use this information to determine methods that could best provide services for children and families facing parental incarceration.

The study hoped to have professionals, such as social workers, counselors, and therapist identify areas that are most affected in the lives of children and families facing parental incarceration. These individuals will be asked to highlight where support is provided, is lacking, and what improvements need to be made. Additionally, participants were asked to provide insight of barriers that do not allow for the prosperity of this population.

There are limitations to this study as well. The study is relying on the experience of a provider while working with this population rather than from the population itself. This means that the providers may not be aware of all the barriers and issues faced by the population. This is because not all families and children may be willing to disclose details of their personal circumstances. By doing so the results of this study may be skewed as the participant may not be able to provide in depth details of their client's experiences. The study can be done over but depending on participants it may provide varying data results.

Sampling

This study used voluntary non-probability sampling to seek participants who are social service providers to this population. The social service providers

may be social workers, counsellors, therapist, and other mental health professionals. This study relied on the distribution of a flier to various providers via email. The study set the following limits: participants must reside in the continental United States and can use a video chat system (Zoom). The study aimed to have between 8 and 25 participants. Each participant will be interviewed via Zoom individually on dates and times set by the participant and researcher.

Data Collection and Instruments

As previously noted, qualitative data will be used for this study. The study used a video chat system, Zoom, to have one on one interview sessions with the participants. Each session will be recorded with live captions as a method to capture transcriptions. The study will ask some general information of the participants including education, position title, and years of experience within the social service profession.

The researcher asked the same predetermined questions of the participant using a mixture of open-ended questions following the general questions noted above. The researcher also asked questions that aided in determining what role the participant took concerning incarceration. The participant was allowed to answer the question with as much detail as they were comfortable and able to without breaking the confidentiality of their clients. The researcher ensured the predetermined questions were asked in the same manner during each interview to keep consistency and increase reliability.

Additional interview questions varied between participants as each had their reservations when answering questions. The researcher focused on similar themes to aid in keeping interviews as cohesive as possible. These topics included the services offered during incarceration, mental health needs during separation, and identified long-term needs due to the incarceration. The researcher used these themes as a guide and ask further questions as appropriate.

Procedures

The researcher created a visual aid (flyer) describing the purpose and goal of the study to find participants. The flyer included the purpose of the study as well as information explaining the process of the study and how to reach out to the researcher. When a participant reached out to the researcher, they were asked to schedule a Zoom and provided with a consent form. The consent form explained the purpose of the study as well as the confidentiality the participant would expect from the researcher.

The interview was held using a video conferencing program, Zoom. The interviews only included the participant and the researcher. During the interview, the researcher asked the participant the predetermined questions and ask clarifying questions as needed. The interview was recorded for transcription only as the participants' identities will remain confidential. Further details regarding protections of confidentiality are discussed in the following section. As there is no

face-to-face contact there was no need on the researcher's side to provide COVID-19 precautions at the time of the interview.

Protection of Human Subjects

The identity of the participants being kept confidential is of utmost importance for the researcher. For this reason, the researcher sought participants through online platforms as they allow for users to remain anonymous or provide limited information about themselves. The researcher asked each participant for an email address solely to send a consent form and the Zoom link. The researcher informed each participant they will refrain from using names in efforts of protecting their confidentiality during the interview process.

A consent form was emailed to the participant 48 hours in advance, so the participant had time to read the form before the scheduled interview time. The email also informed the participant that they did not need to send the form back as the researcher will complete it for them at the time of the interview. At the time of the interview, the researcher asked the participant if they had any questions or hesitations regarding the study, the interview, or the consent form. If the participant agreed to continue the interview, the researcher will explain the form is being signed with an "X" and the date of the interview. If the participants no longer wished to interview, the researcher thanked the participant and terminate the Zoom meeting accordingly.

The interviews were recorded using the Zoom platform. Only the audio recording of the interviews was kept as the video portions were deleted. The saved files were kept on a password and fingerprint-secured laptop belonging to the researcher. Any handwritten notes made during the interviews were kept in a locked desk within a private office space also belonging to the researcher. After three years of study completion, all stored information and recordings will be permanently deleted and shredded.

It is important to reiterate that the researcher will not need to provide COVID 19 precautions to the participant as the interviews will be held via Zoom. The participant was responsible for their protection regarding COVID 19.

Data Analysis

The data gathered from the interviews was analyzed with thematic analysis of similarities or differences in topics, feelings, or constructs. As previously mentioned, the interviews were converted into transcripts. These transcripts were reviewed, and a system of numerical codes were used to notate recurring information and themes developed.

Other information gathered was the demographic information of the participants. This information covered education, position title, and years of experience within the social service profession.

Summary

The goal of this chapter was to discuss the methods that were used in the study. The chapter identified the study design, sampling methods, data collection, procedures, and analysis of the data. Additionally, the actions being taken by the researcher to protect the confidentiality of the participants were also outlined.

CHAPTER FOUR

EVALUATION

Introduction

Various professionals were interviewed on the topic of parental incarceration regarding the long-term effects it has on children. From these interviews various recurring topics and themes emerged. The recurring themes are presented in the following tables: the first of these tables provides the educational background information of the participants.

Analysis

Table 1 provides each participant's education and career summary. Participants all had multiple years of experience working with children, specifically children who had at least one incarcerated parent. The participants also all had a master's level of education in a field that focused on the mental health and wellbeing of children and their families. Their experience ranged from working in public welfare systems, education, to private therapy settings, all of which demonstrate the widespread impact of parental incarceration.

Tables 2 - 5 focus on the recurring themes and topics that emerged from the conducted interviews. The themes were classified into the following categories: people, places, things, and ideas. These themes were established following the transcription of the interviews conducted. The tables created from this information may contain quotes to show how this theme emerged.

Thematic Results

The research question addressed by this study is the following: what are the stressors and traumas associated with parental incarceration and the long-term effects on children and how social workers can help alleviate these stressors? This question allowed for a qualitative study to determine the areas that require support from public welfare agencies who provide services to children who have an incarcerated parent.

Table 1. Demographic of Research Participants

Demographic	Participant Response
Gender	Female, female, female, female, female, female, female, female
Ethnicity	Hispanic, Hispanic, Hispanic, Hispanic, White, Hispanic, African American, Hispanic
Education (title)	Social Worker II, LCSW, MSW, MSW, AMFT, MSW, MSW, M.E.d/PPSC/LPCC
Years of Social Service Experience	6, 22, 9, 20, 6, 2.5, 8, 6
Practice Interests	Child welfare, youth/families, trauma, criminal justice, individual therapy, education, equity, social service, long-term trauma

Table 2: Research Theme: People

Content/Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...worked hand in hand with the assigned county social worker, we would go looking for the services." • "The Inland Regional Center for clients and then we had some group services, but most services were provided by the county social workers." • Visitation in jail "...if the judge says no then there's nothing we could have done." • "As far as the court, we have to have the court's permission before doing anything. " • "...take you to the jail to sit with you there for hours until you could see your mom or dad. A lot of caregivers aren't willing to do that. The people from CFS that supervise visits aren't willing to do all that." • "the kid resents CFS. The caregivers resent, the parents resent CFS, and then they see us as more of a burden rather than a source that's just trying to help." • "The challenges that some of these caregivers, whether it's a group home, a foster parent, legal guardian, family member, some of them will have that idea and they will, they won't be supportive of the visits." • "The kids can go to court and request that they want to see their parent in jail."

Table 3: Research Theme: Places

Content/Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "one parent who didn't want to see his child because he didn't want them to see him that way...meaning behind bars, talking through a phone, in a jumpsuit, so I think that the impacts are largely emotional." • "I know that your dad writes you letters, are you interested in seeing him?" • "As for services, not all prisons and jails have certain services. But the services that actually have that are going to help a parent meet their case plan goals, are often limited." • "Sometimes some jails and prisons would have anger management because it benefited the populations." • "Visitations were approved in some cases but it's a drawback because it's not just the county, not just the court, its' a also the prison." • "...I never asked my clients to take little bitty kids, lake a baby, to the jail. Like, it's pointless, what are you going to do? Hold the baby up to the glass for somebody to look at for an hour."

-
- “I think that the jail system somehow does help some of these parents that those programs are already there.”
 - “...the jails won’t let [social workers] in to do interviews or they won’t make it available for a phone contact unless you’re their attorney or a family member.”
-

Table 4: Research Theme: Things

Content/Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “With a case plan we know the studies tell us that reunification, a huge part of it is reunification.” • “I know that your dad writes you letters, are you interested in seeing him?” • “Creating a case plan was perfectly fine, however, having them stay committed and consistent to the case plan was the problem. “ • “Social workers would approve multiple phone calls to the parent who was incarcerated. In some cases they would even provide a balance so that it wouldn’t have to come out of the kids monthly allowance.” • “...visits once a month, once a week, phone calls, stuff to gradually build the visits.” • “The case plan has visitation time. so okay, COVID is maybe not the best time for kids to be go to the jail. But can we facilitate phone calls? Can we do letters? I have seen that a lot. The parent will send a letter to the social worker, the social worker reviews it, then gives it to the kid. The kid then gives a letter to the social worker, the social worker reviews it, and then send it to mom to dad.” • “The judge will usually order that the social worker facilitate retrieval and giving of letters. The parents just have to ask.” • “if there is no court order, then it becomes more of a decision of the worker already.” • “...because an education right wasn’t given those student’s can’t receive counseling services or any type of service. So without a court order, you basically have no access to services.”

Table 5: Research Theme: Ideas/Emotions

Content/Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disassociation • Isolation • Education • “They didn’t know what was acceptable. They played this demeanor of ‘I’m in charge and I’m going to do what I want’ even though they’re little. The mother’s were actually afraid of the children.” • “...seems like we’re punishing the parent who was left to struggle.” • “Compounding trauma” • “If children verbalize this [a parent being incarcerated] then they feel like they’re going to be teased and bullied.” • “People are less empathetic...there’s a stigma with it. Your parent is a bad person or evil because they’re incarcerated, they must have done something wrong.” • “...children of incarcerated parents would end up in a continuing cycle. So struggling with incarceration themselves...because that what they know and that’s what they’re familiar with, that’s who they identify with.” • “...we contribute to helping the children of incarcerated parents become institutionalized and ready for incarceration themselves.” • “...there is an emotional impact on the children and families. Obviously feelings of grief, loss, and anger.” • “...funding and support would have to occur for our system, for our jails, to be able to do rehabilitation of all kinds: mental health, substance abuse, skill building, educational components...a really holistic approach to rehabilitation in our legal system.” • “...that attachment or bond with the parents and or sometimes you’ll develop like abandonment issues and all of those. Again, the attachment, bonding, and the abandonment issues affect the future relationships, either with family members, or a significant other. It creates barriers for them.” • “The majority of the challenges that those kids had a very difficult time, making a connection, like forming a bond with the foster parent or even other people.” • “The things we [public welfare agencies] offer are cookie cutter, parenting, domestic violence, substance abuse treatment, counseling. While those are important, they need to be tailored to the whatever the issues are.” • “...it creates a sense of abandonment in the kids...” • “...depression or overall lack of motivation for anything that’ll get them out of their situation...a lack of self-worth that I see in them.” • “It’s almost like a culture of criminality.”

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- “The trauma was not having consistency, unable to connect with people, unable to trust anyone because of what they had experienced. If they didn’t have the connection, or if the child had some behavioral problems, or if the child couldn’t get along with other children the child was removed.”
 - “Something that often the children would have is conflicted feelings.”
 - “When the parent is incarcerated, the child grieves and then it affects the children because they feel abandoned.”
 - “Dealing with the fact that mom and dad, other mom or dad, or what have you is in jail or in prison, and the trauma, and the grief that comes with that, So it’s just really nasty compounding trauma for those children, that we don’t do a great job of healing.”
 - “For our children in the foster care system, their grades are affected because they don’t know how to feel or cope with the situation of being removed.”
 - “they’re not receive the adequate help ...this creates that cycle of trauma, it can take generations to break that cycle.”
 - “...our system is not really built to rehabilitate.”
 - “I feel like one of the things you learn, you know being whether you’re in a stable household, with your biological parents or foster parents, or adoptive parents, you learned stability. You learn consistency, accountability, all those types of things and that’s something that those kids don’t have.”
 - “...the women’s prison at Glen Helen...had a whole program where it helped bridge the gap between women who were incarcerated and their children when they were released. Their children could come and have whole day visits and have holiday visits, and stay overnight”
 - “Their relationship is lost with their bio parent and if their little enough they may not understand. Like, well why can’t I see mom? They might think like they never want me.”
 - “there’s not enough bilingual therapist. And that’s one of the reasons why a lot of parents are hesitant about reaching out.”
 - “...non-profits, all of them are capped, the waitlists are up to almost 2 years long. MediCal only offers ten sessions then everything after would be out of pocket so the parent’s can’t afford it.”
-

Summary

The long-term effects of parental incarceration were broken down into various elements including people, places, things, and ideas. These elements were gathered by thematically analyzing interviews and organizing them into tables. The analysis of data will be further explained in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

Based on the information provided by the participants, various areas of need were identified for the identified population. The chapter discusses the recommendations as provided by the participants of the study who have experience with the population this study focused on. Additionally, this chapter highlights the ideas and feelings which coincide with the literature cited in earlier chapters.

Discussion

The themes and ideas that emerged from this study were significant in highlighting areas where social workers can aid the population of focus. The participants expressed a lack of support from both agencies and providers when facing parental incarceration. The participants also identified various long-term effects that affect children who experienced having at least one incarcerated parent. The long-term effects identified in the literature review were reflected in the interviews conducted as well.

Absence of Support

The study found that the lack of support from social workers caused more limitations in the communication between children and the incarcerated parent. The participants identified this as an area of concern when attempting to lessen

the long-term effects of incarceration on children. A social service practitioner highlighted the lack of willingness of social workers to wait at a jail or prison with a child for them to have the ability to visit the incarcerated parent. They identified this unwillingness is not due to malice but rather the high case numbers assigned to them. It is important to note that social workers are not the only people who do not show this willingness. The participants also indicated that caregivers, including foster parents, are not willing to make visitation accommodations for the children. This is due to a variety of reasons including length of travel, length of waiting time, concerns regarding the quality of the visit, and the behaviors exhibited by the child following the visit.

The study found that this lack of support caused negative feelings between the child and the assigned social worker, between the child and the incarcerated parent, and between the incarcerated parent and the social worker. There were feelings of resentment that arose within these relationships. The feelings of resentment create further barriers between the child and family when working with the social worker. As previously mentioned, children who experienced separation from a parent due to incarceration have a difficult time creating and maintaining connections with people.

It can be implied that the lack of action on behalf of the social worker and caregivers causes an exaggeration of the maladaptive behaviors previously discussed. The absence of support is something that needs to be addressed for these families. This support can be provided by the social worker, caregivers,

and other agencies. The idea of resources was also brought forward and will be discussed further.

“...Working Hand In Hand With The Assigned County Social Worker, We Would Go Looking For Services.” “...Most Services Were Provided By The County Social Workers.”

The study found that the communication between county social workers and other agencies brought attention to the needs of the children and families which could assist them in meeting their needs. This highlighted the importance of communication between all non-family parties who become involved with these families. As reported, the social worker who reached out to other agencies was able to assist in having additional resources made available for the children and families.

This demonstrates the importance of communication amongst various parties, but it also demonstrates the difficulty that families experience when seeking services. If the families did not have a social worker assigned to them, they would need to take time to find services and resources. Social workers took this burden from the families and children which lessens the levels of stress these families experience. Various organizations have different requirements that need to be met before they can become involved with a family or child. Should a family be unaware of the requirements, they may be denied services at various times which could lead to more stress and a loss of hope.

In addition to this, social workers may have other avenues only available to families they work with. As previously mentioned, organizations have different requirements some of which require a family to hope open referrals with a social

service department or for a child to be in a dependency case (meaning the child is in the care of a caregiver who is not their biological parent). The study highlighted this aspect of services available to children and families.

“...One Parent Who Didn’t Want To See His Child Because He Didn’t Want Them To See Him That Way...Meaning Behind Bars, Talking Through A Phone, In A Jumpsuit, So I Think That The Impacts Are Largely Emotional.”

The desire of a parent to not have their child see them while incarcerated demonstrates the immense impact incarceration has on not only the children but also the parents. Parents are forced to decide to limit if not completely stop the communication between themselves and their children. Unfortunately, this action adds to the feelings of abandonment and isolation that were identified in the literature. The parent makes these decisions to keep the child from seeing them in a negative light but may not always be aware of the aftermath of this disconnection.

This also highlights the stigma that pursues incarceration in society. The incarcerated parent understands that being incarcerated, wearing a jumpsuit, and not being able to have a normal form of communication with their child cannot be ignored. The child’s perception of the parent is altered and disfigured by this image of their parent. Additionally, the lack of visitation or lack of physical touch (hugs) between the parent and child is emotionally tolling. In a normal setting, the child and parent can play games, speak without glass or bars between them, and exchange a physical form of affection. The jail and prison systems eliminate this ability thus eliminating the ability for the parent and child to build a normal relationship.

Visitation and communication components were identified at various times within the study. Further examples will be discussed in addition to this one in the following pages.

“The Case Plan Has Visitation Time, So Okay Maybe COVID Is Not The Best Time For The Kids To Be Going To The Jail. But Can We Facilitate Phone Calls? Can We Do Letters? I Have Seen That A Lot. The Parent Will Send A Letter To The Social Worker, The Social Worker Reviews It, Them Gives It To The Kid. The Kids Them Gives A Letter To The Social Worker, The Social Worker Reviews It, And Then Send It To The Mom Or Dad.”

The study found that letters are an important factor in this topic. This might suggest that the parents' active role in expressing themselves and having that expression monitored and filtered through a social worker might teach the parent how to express themselves appropriately to their child via a letter. The action of writing a letter may imply that the effort required to write a letter, have it monitored, and mailed demonstrates the importance of connection. The parents can demonstrate they are willing to put forth the effort to maintain a relationship with their child even though the communication will not be simple.

These letters can also assist the parent in court when fighting for custody of their child should it be in question. As mentioned above, the process of communication via letter is not simple. Often letters include highly emotional messages that a parent may want to keep between themselves and their child, but this privacy is non-existent when they are incarcerated. The social worker, in attempt to keep the child safe, needs to monitor the communication by reading the letter first. However, this could also be a positive for the parent. Should a social worker note that the communication is positive and does not cause

emotional or mental harm to the child and is consistent, the information can be provided to a judge to demonstrate the incarcerated parent's positive actions with the child.

"People Are Less Empathetic...There's A Stigma With It. Your Parent Is A Bad Person Or Evil Because They're Incarcerated, They Must Have Done Something Wrong." "...There Is An Emotional Impact On The Children And Families. Obviously Feelings Of Grief, Loss, And Anger."

The study supported the literature regarding incarceration by highlighting the isolation that occurs within this population. These children are not able to seek social and emotional support in the way that others not experiencing parental incarceration do. These families have a more difficult time expressing their loss and grief because the loss is not permanent and not caused by death. Society stigmatized incarceration and does not understand how similar it is to other forms of loss.

This could imply that the loss from incarceration is exaggerated more than a loss to death or physical distance due to relocation. This population can choose to explain why the parent is out of the home but runs the possibility of being viewed as the other or as an extension of a bad person. It can be suggested that this population requires a more specialized form of resources in the forms of counseling and therapy. These resources would need to have competency with incarceration and the societal stigmas that surround it. Social workers can provide this assistance by either taking on the role of the provider or by identifying organizations/providers who can fulfill this need.

These feelings of loss, anger, and grief can also be addressed within the letters previously mentioned. The communication between the incarcerated parent and child continues to play a role in allowing the child to process these emotions. The child can be honest with the parent and seek solace in them. Having emotional support, even if only via letters, helps the process of the loss in a healthy manner that may not always be available.

“They Didn’t Know What Was Acceptable. They Played This Demeanor Of ‘I’m In Charge And I’m Going To Do What I Want, Even Though They’re Little. The Mothers Were Actually Afraid Of The Children.”

Behavioral outbursts and maladaptive behaviors identified could suggest that the loss of a parent due to incarceration causes an increase in instability in the home. This could be due to a decrease in stability and parenting in the home. As the literature highlighted, the paternal figure is often the incarcerated parent. It is generally the paternal figure that enforces and set behavioral boundaries within the home. If the maternal figure is not able to maintain and enforce the boundaries set by the paternal figure, the existing boundaries weaken.

It is important to note that behavioral issues and outbursts can also be caused by a lack of a healthy outlet for dealing with the emotions of parental incarceration. The children are not able to express and communicate their emotions and difficulties when a parent is incarcerated for various reasons, some of which were discussed in the previous section. When this occurs, as mentioned in the literature review, there is an increase in child abuse and neglect. As the study highlights, the parent left in the home may become afraid of their child’s behaviors thus leading to more forceful actions aimed at correcting the behavior.

The parent may begin using corporal or physical punishments that can cause visible marks, bruises, or injury to a child raising concerns of abuse within the home. The parent may also find themselves using more derogatory terms of verbiage towards the child, causing emotional and mental harm to the child. Another way a parent may choose to punish the child for misbehaving is by restricting access to their everyday needs. This can look like restricting access to food, water, or basic hygiene needs. Additionally, the caregiver may tell the child to leave the home without providing safe alternate housing accommodation.

These forms of abuse and neglect can be raised to social service agencies, such as child protective services, causing another traumatic event in the home. Social service agencies may determine the safety of the child cannot be maintained in the home requiring the removal of the child from the parent who is not incarcerated. Again, the child is experiencing yet another loss where stigmas will not allow them to be open about their experiences. The loss of the incarcerated parent and possibly the loss of the other caregiver due to the child being removed causes a loss of trust in others. It can be implied that inconsistency within the home has long-term effects on these children. The consistency within the home and the life of the child will be discussed further.

“The Trauma Was Not Having Consistency, Unable To Connect With People, Unable To Trust Anyone Because Of What They Had Experienced.” “...It Creates A Sense Of Abandonment In The Kids...”

As mentioned previously, the loss of consistency is yet another factor that alters the outcome of this population. The study found that trust in others is affected by the loss of the parental figure in the home. The change in behaviors

and trust in other people might indicate that maintaining the normalcy of everyday life for the child is key to ensuring a positive outcome. The incarcerated parent needs to be able to support the non-incarcerated parent as well as the child to ensure there is not a gap in normal living.

In the previous sections, communication and connection were highlighted and it is again brought to light. Abandonment concerns and feelings can be mitigated by facilitating the communication and connection between the child and incarcerated parent. Although phone contact and letters cannot replace having the parent in the home it does show an attempt in maintaining the family unit intact. Social workers can aid in this by facilitating communication, however more resources than are currently available are necessary, this will be discussed further in a later section.

“...Children Of Incarcerated Parents Would End Up In A Continuing Cycle. So, Struggling With Incarceration Themselves. Because That Is What They Know And That’s What They’re Familiar With, That’s Who They Identify With.”

The study identified the possibility of maladaptive role modeling due to the child’s identification with the incarcerated parent. The study found a continuing cycle of incarceration which might suggest that the parent inadvertently modeled a lifestyle to the child. Although it was previously highlighted that an incarcerated parent may choose to eliminate the in-person visitation contact with their child, the effects of incarceration do not just stop. The children adopt the lifestyle presented to them by their parents regardless of the negative results in their own lives.

This means finding is also supported in the literature which was reviewed for this study. The children of incarcerated parents experience incarceration themselves at higher rates as an effect of having experienced losing a parent to incarceration. This implies that the attachment between the child and the parent is not easily broken or changed. The children want to be as connected to their parents which may mean they opt to follow in their parent's footsteps. The children inadvertently model their parents' behaviors and mentality.

Social workers and other professional interventions are necessary at various levels within this population. The field of social work allows professionals to adapt to the population's needs to help build and identify their strengths. However, interventions are necessary not only for the child but also for the incarcerated parent. The idea of multidisciplinary teams will be discussed next.

"...Funding And Support Would Have To Occur For Our System, Out Jails, To Be Able To Do Rehabilitation Of All Kinds: Mental Health, Substance Abuse, Skill Building, Educational Components...A Really Holistic Approach To Rehabilitation In Our Legal System."

The idea of a lack of resources was important in the study. This might suggest that resources could provide a possible solution to strengthening the child's relationship with the incarcerated parent. Rehabilitation services were identified as being limited for this population. These services include parenting classes, substance abuse, education, and mental health, all of which can aid in the strengthening of a family unit. This servicing requires funding which is often cut from budgets within our penal systems.

Social workers are not able to assist the incarcerated parent with finding these services as they are limited to whatever the jail or prison offers. This might redirect the focus to the need for restructuring within the prison system. Should the incarcerated parent participate in these services, they may become another positive avenue available to the child. The study found that when these services were offered to the incarcerated parent, the connection was maintained and strengthened.

A participant explained some services allowed children to spend an entire day, overnight, and even holidays with an incarcerated parent. This allowed for some normalcy between the child and the parent and helped maintain their bond. This highlights the importance of connection and may imply that these programs and services are necessary for the mitigation of negative long-term effects caused by incarceration. The lack of these resources may suggest that a multidisciplinary team of providers is necessary as each component of the team can address the multitude of concerns for the family including the incarcerated parent. This would hopefully aid in a smooth transition for the event that the incarcerated parent is released and able to return to the home. As the literature revealed, the issues do not stop just because the incarcerated parent returns. The issues change and adapt to the new family structure.

Compounding Trauma

The study found various examples of the long-term effects parental incarceration has on children and families. Due to the length of time and the

reoccurrence of incarceration, the trauma effects often compound on one another suggesting there is no one solution to mitigate the effects. The identification of trauma, through lack of trust, could suggest that the child might not even be able to trust professionals such as a therapist, counselors, and social workers. The lack of trust in the child may redirect how social workers work with children of incarcerated people. This is due to the recognition that building trust is necessary to provide psychological counseling.

The trauma might redirect research away from social work intervention to LCSW clinical intervention. This trauma might highlight one of the very most important effects of parental incarceration. This may also highlight how fragile the children of incarcerated parents are. Due to this reason, social workers are necessary with aiding in the identification of needs and facilitation of the referral process for resources. As previously mentioned, the act of finding available resources alone is not easy. For many families, this is another additional stressor that, if done incorrectly could lead to more trauma.

This is because the child may not have the appropriate provider who is knowledgeable in the field of incarceration. The provider may not be aware of how much grief the child feels or the protective boundaries the child has set to protect themselves from being abandoned again. Social workers can help guide the family and provide the support necessary until a professional who can help the child through their grief and emotional needs can take over.

Recommendations For Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research

Research

The elements discussed in the sections above attempted to identify issues that currently exist which hinder the positive change in the population being studied. The identified recurring themes found that the most necessary area of change is the need for resources at various levels. However, further research is needed within this population regarding the long-term effects that incarceration has on children. The recommendation is to expand the study and incorporate professionals within the justice and penal systems to determine the ability to make changes within the jail and prison systems. This would provide insight as to how the field of social work and the justice system currently work together in hopes of identifying areas of possible growth.

Policy

A recommendation this study has for policy is to have a collaboration of social workers in the penal system. The study was unable to identify how social workers are used within the jail and prison systems. The incorporation of these professionals in jails and prisons would allow for the development and enforcement of resources needed by parents who are incarcerated. As previously mentioned, these parents can benefit from a multidisciplinary team of services while incarcerated.

Social Work Practice and Conclusions

From the results and discussion of this study, it seems that social workers have been providing necessary steps when working with children of incarcerated parents. However, social workers are limited by the availability of resources for this population. The benefits of resources are vast and yet they continue to be negated and discontinued for these families. Services such as counseling, therapy, education, and parenting classes are not easily attainable to these families unless they encounter social service agencies, such as child protection services. These families are aided in receiving services but are limited. The incarcerated parent cannot receive services unless the prison or jail they are incarcerated in provides the services. Thus, making it difficult to address the long-term effect their incarceration has on the children.

Social workers need to continue to voice the right of the incarcerated parent as these populations often face social injustice. This is an ethical principle that the NASW code of ethics highlights for those who practice in this field. Additionally, the importance of human relationships is listed as an ethical principle. The study expressed the importance of maintaining the relationship between children and their incarcerated parents as a form of mitigating the long-term effects of incarceration. Understanding these effects is important in preserving and maintaining the health of children who have an incarcerated parent.

APPENDIX A
FLYER SEEKING PARTICIPANTS

The following is the information presented on the flyer which was used to seek participants.

The purpose of this study is to understand how social service professional understand the effects of parental incarceration on children and families. Service providers, such as social workers, counselors, and therapists, are eligible to participate. The study consists of an interview (conducted through Zoom) which will take between 25-30 minutes to complete. If you are interested in participating, please email the researcher at Sharon.rose0576@coyote.csusb.edu.

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT AND
IRB APPROVAL

The study in which you are asked to participate in has been designed to help identify the long-term effects parental incarceration has on children and families and find ways in which social workers can help mitigate these effects. The study is being conducted by Sharon Rose, a graduate student, under the supervision of Dr. Thomas Davis, Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at CSUSB (IRB# IRB-FY2022-40).

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to identify the long-term effects parental incarceration has on children and families.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked questions regarding their lived experienced of separation- due to incarceration.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your responses will remain confidential, and data will be reported in group form only.

DURATION: The video interview will take between 25 to 30 minutes.

RISKS: Due to the sensitivity, some discomfort may be experienced. If there is a question you do not feel comfortable answering any question you can skip the question or terminate the interview.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participants, but the information gathered will aid in gaining knowledge regarding the area of study.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Davis at (909)537-3839 or tomDavis@csusb.edu. RESULTS: Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2023.

Review Complete

Initial

IRB-FY2022-40 - Incarceration Effects on Children and Families

View

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PI: Thomas Davis	Current Analyst: Armando Barragan Jr.	Decision: Approved	Policy: Post-2018 Rule
Review Type: Expedited	Review Board: Main IRB Designated Reviewers for School of Social Work		

Approvals

Task History

Letters

Attachments

Research Team

Name	Role	Result	Date
Armando Barragan Jr.	Analyst	Administratively Certified	01-10-2022 9:13 AM
Thomas Davis	Principal Investigator	Completed by Armando Barragan Jr.	
Sharon Rose	Co-Principal Investigator	Certified	12-10-2021 5:34 PM

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW GUIDE

The interview will be primarily open-ended questions regarding your experience with children and families who have an incarcerated parent. The interview will be between 25-30 minutes. As a reminder you can chose to opt out of answering questions should you not feel comfortable answering them.

Current occupation/license title:

Years in the field of social work or social service:

1. Can you talk about the types of challenges families with incarcerated parent(s)/caregiver(s) face?
2. What are some of the challenges faced when creating a case plan or treatment plan for this population?
3. Are there any alternative case plans available for these families? If so, what do they look like?
4. In a perfect world, what would a case plan look like for this population?
5. Can you identify any drawbacks with social service agencies becoming involved with this population?
6. What are the types of services that are most used and needed for this population?
7. How does this population perceive services such as counseling or therapy?
8. What type of long-term trauma effects do you notice in these families?
9. How often would the child want to visit their parent (# of cases)
10. Is it promoted for the child to visit the parent?

11. Can you provide some reasons for why these families become involved with your agency?

Developed by Sharon Rose

APPENDIX D
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Thank you for your participation in this study. The study for which you participated hopes to address the areas in which social workers can assist with mitigating the long-term effects separation due to incarceration has on children. The researcher understands that past traumas, which were in part discussed during the interview, may cause you to have some discomfort or distress. It is just as important to the researcher that you have access to resources to aid you in processing this distress. Below you will find options for free mental health services that you may use at your own discretion. These resources are available to you and your family as well.

SAMHSA: (800) 662-4357 SAMHSA (TTY): (800) 847-4889

NAMI: (800) 950-6264 or via email info@nami.org

NAMI via text message: 741-741

NAMI via web: nami.org using the “chat with us” option National Suicide

Prevention Lifeline: (800) 273-8255

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