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## Vicarious Reinforcement and Punishment among the Children of the Incarcerated: Using Social Learning Theory to Understand Differential Effects of Parental Incarceration

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## **Vicarious Reinforcement and Punishment among the Children of the Incarcerated: Using Social Learning Theory to Understand Differential Effects of Parental Incarceration**

### **Abstract**

In this literature synthesis, research concerning the effects of parental incarceration on children is reviewed. Literature from across disciplines is synthesized to advance the understanding of how parental incarceration affect children, as well as to propose vicarious reinforcement and punishment as a potential mechanism to explain positive outcomes of this type of separation. It has been a predominant view that this population is at risk for serious negative outcomes, like behavioral issues, even before parental incarceration. It is obvious that children with parents in prison or jail do constitute an especially fragile population group needing urgent attention for social, educational, and psychological services. However, research findings are mixed and several problems with research on this population have been identified, such as issues with identification, access, as well as research quality. The purpose of this review is to summarize recent research findings on the differential effects of parental incarceration on educational outcomes, as well as introduce vicarious reinforcement and punishment from Bandura's social learning theory as possible mechanisms that safeguard these children from negative outcomes. Implications for future research and intervention development are offered.

### **Keywords**

social learning theory, observational learning, educational psychology, parental incarceration

## INTRODUCTION

Given that the United States leads the world in per capita rates of incarceration, it is natural that the number of children affected by parental incarceration is also high. Currently, an estimate of 6 million U. S. children have at some point lived without one or both parents due to incarceration (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). Parental incarceration is a term used across disciplines to describe the experience surrounding the initial arrest, detention, and imprisonment, as well as probation and parole status, of a parent. The experience of parental incarceration involves more than the detainment and removal of the parent from the home; parental reentry also presents challenging interactions. These effects ‘beyond the prison walls’ are just some of the pain caused by incarceration (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020). However, with children of the incarcerated do not experience these ‘pains’ in a homogenous manner (Haggerty & Bacerius, 2020). A proportion of these children succeed academically and do not exhibit anti-social behavior (Author, 2016; Joy et al., 2020; Wakefield & Powell, 2016).

Given that this population is estimated to be 1 out of 9 students in U.S. public schools (Peterson, et al., 2015), educators, psychologists, and counselors are very likely to serve them (Turney, 2019). Despite the array of theoretical frameworks within educational psychology, only social learning theory has been called upon to explain why the children of the incarcerated are more likely to commit crime. This explanation, as well as current research which focuses on parental individual characteristics (e.g., gender), does not account for the children that *do* graduate high school, attend college, and resist criminal, antisocial behavior. In addition, the effect of parental incarceration has not been examined in terms of learning outcomes other than high school graduation. In this paper, we offer vicarious reinforcement and punishment as a possible explanation for why some children of the incarcerated engage in prosocial behavior. In light of this explanation, practitioners need not treat the children of prisoners in a one-size-fits-all fashion (Johnson et al., 2018).

To date, the academic success of the children of the incarcerated has not extensively studied. Although the captive audience of the imprisoned parents have been studied in the past, these parents rarely have an understanding of their children’s experiences (Haskins & Jacobsen, 2017). In fact, a majority of the state prison population reported never getting to see their children for visitation (Glaze & Maruscak, 2010; Rabuy & Kopf, 2015). In terms of academic challenges, Turney (2014) found high rates of learning disabilities, communication problems, and developmental delays among these children. In order to understand the supports and barriers to success for this population, longitudinal educational research must be conducted. In this synthesis, we review the existing literature on resilient children of the incarcerated and offer vicarious reinforcement and punishment as possible

safeguards for these children. Areas for future research include the effects of which parent is in prison, other role models, peer groups, environmental factors, and intervention programs. Such research could better focus future resources for targeted early intervention to promote high school and college graduation as well as prosocial behavior.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

We have conducted a review of the literature to advance the understanding of how parental incarceration affects children, some of whom develop resiliency. This research area has been the subject of a number of published and unpublished works in such diverse disciplines as criminology, family science, law studies, psychology, social work, and sociology. Based on recent evidence, we propose that vicarious punishment and negatively reinforced behaviors can explain children's behavioral reactions to parental incarceration.

## **PREVALANCE AND POLICY**

Recently, there has been an upsurge in interest in the well-being of the children of the incarcerated from researchers, policymakers, and human service providers. The first type of research that has been conducted involves the prevalence of this population. The United States as compared to other industrialized countries currently has one of the highest number of children (about six million) with incarcerated parents (Peterson et al., 2015; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). Although the risk of maternal incarceration has risen over the last 40 years, paternal incarceration is still more prevalent. Children of less-educated mothers and minority groups are significantly more at-risk to experience parental incarceration (Turney & Adams, 2016; Wildeman, 2009).

The extent of the problem had triggered serious concern on the part of the federal government including the President of the United States. In 2013, President Obama called for an urgent inter-agency collaboration to address the problem. As a result, the Children of Incarcerated Parents Working Group was created that consisted of representatives of the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services, Justice, Housing and Urban Development, Agriculture, as well as the Social Security Administration (see Garcia, 2013). This working group created a toolkit for child welfare agencies working with the children. However, only a portion of the children end up in foster care. This is more likely when the mother is incarcerated (Jones et al., 2019).

Researchers are compiling important information to understand the various facets of the impact of parental incarceration on the children, their families, and society. Not only do the circumstances of incarceration vary, the extent of contact with children also varies between state facilities as compared to federal facilities (Glaze

& Maruscak, 2008). For example, many federal facilities are located far from the prisoner's home, often out of their home state, making it difficult for visitation to occur. Furthermore, visitation procedures can be "intrusive and traumatic" with the security put down and presence of weapons from correctional staff (Turney, 2019, p. 26). Even phone calls can be prohibitively expensive to make. Contact with the incarcerated parent is just one individual factor that may contribute to a child's life outcomes (Rabuy & Kopf, 2015).

## **EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES**

What is the real impact on students as they experience parental incarceration? There is scant research available to answer this question. The evidence points to an indirect relationship. General reviews have also been conducted on the children of the incarcerated (Adams, 2018). In 2014, the American Psychological Association released a cross-cultural collection of studies on the effects of incarceration, which highlighted the increased risk for future criminal behavior among the children of the incarcerated. Murray, Farrington, and Sekol (2012) conducted a meta-analytic review of studies on parental incarceration examining various child outcomes and found the same result regarding antisocial behavior. In terms of educational outcomes, the results vary across the samples (Cox, 2009; Dannerback, 2005; Geller, Cooper, Garfinkel, Schwartz-Soicher, & Mincy, 2012; Gordon, 2009; Hagan & Foster, 2012a; Murray & Farrington, 2008; Murray, Loeber, & Pardini, 2012; Neal, 2009; Ng, Sarri, & Stoffregen, 2013; Stanton, 1980; Stroble, 1997; Trice & Brewster, 2004). A significant association between parental incarceration and poor educational outcomes was found across samples. Specifically, children affected by parental incarceration were 1.4 times more likely to perform poorly in school with a slightly higher chance ( $OR = 1.5$ ) among children in community-based samples. The relationship between parental incarceration and educational outcomes was significantly weaker across studies.

School readiness in terms of behavioral expectations have been found weaker among children of the incarcerated accounting for the high prevalence of special education placement (Haskins, 2014). Moreover, students with incarcerated fathers are significantly more likely to be held back in elementary school retention, controlling for behavioral reports and test scores. Teachers' perceptions of the child's academic ability were found to moderate this relationship (Turney & Haskins, 2014). Research also cites stigma as the most detrimental direct effect of parental incarceration affecting educational performance. Teachers were found to have significantly lower expectations for students whose mothers were incarcerated compared to a group of students whose mothers were absent from home for other reasons (Dalliare, Ciccone, & Wilson, 2010).

Parke and Clarke-Stewart (2002) identify school problems as long-term effects of parental incarceration on school-age children. Problems such as “learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, behavioral or conduct problems, developmental delays, and speech or language problems” are very predominant in this population (Turney, 2014, p. 302). Also, paternal incarceration has been found to be associated with social exclusion (Foster & Hagan, 2007) and lower GPA (Hagan & Foster, 2012a). Further analyses using propensity scores revealed that the likelihood of paternal incarceration was more predictive of lower GPA, than actual incarceration (Foster & Hagan, 2009). Similar associations were found when maternal incarceration was examined (Hagan & Foster, 2012b). More recent research, however has found that an association between low grades in school and parental incarceration may be chiefly due to selection effects (McCauley, 2020). This adds to the list of problems with research on this population, including issues with identification, access, as well as research quality (Billings, 2017).

## **INTERVENTIONS**

What is being done to prevent negative academic outcomes? Outside of prison-based parenting programs (Henson, 2020), few school-based interventions have been developed due to the many issues innate in the implementation of such programs (Vacca, 2008). Part of the issue is identification; authorities are not required to contact public schools upon incarceration of a parent. Another part of the issue is stigma (Miller & Crain, 2020); once identified, for children of incarcerated parents, being singled out would be problematic. Although access is often cited as a barrier for research in this area (Easterling & Johnson, 2015), the children of the incarcerated parents are students in public schools where teachers, counselors, and administrators can make a difference.

## **DIFFERENTIAL EFFECTS**

There are differential effects of a parental incarceration depending on individual environmental factors (Johnson et al., 2018). Environmental factors, like a role model can positively impact academic outcomes for the children of the incarcerated (Joy et al, 2020). Likewise, there are different trajectories of developing internalized problems (e.g., depression and anxiety) or externalized behaviors (e.g., aggression and vandalism) among the children of the incarcerated (Kjellstrand et al., 2018; Kjellstrand et al., 2020; Sullivan 2019). Social contexts of children’s lives, including demographics, behavioral characteristics, and socioeconomic status, are important because they determine the consequences of parental incarceration Turney (2017). These factors allow for heterogeneous

consequences based on what type of exposure or risk they have for parental incarceration. It determines the impact something like parent incarceration will have on a child. For instance, African-American boys have a higher risk of experiencing paternal incarceration (Haskins et al., 2018; Turney & Adams, 2016).

However, Turney (2017) argues that the children who have the lowest chance of parental incarceration are impacted more than children who have a moderate or high risk of parental incarceration. Turney studied the associations between parental incarceration, externalizing and internalizing behaviors, juvenile delinquency, reading and math comprehension, and verbal ability. Children were divided into three groups based on risk for parental incarceration. The children in the first group, who had the lowest risk of parental incarceration, were significantly more impaired by both externalizing and internalizing behaviors, as well as lower comprehension and verbal ability. Those with only a moderate risk of parental incarceration showed the same trend without the effect on juvenile delinquency, math comprehension, and verbal ability. Despite the highest risk of parental incarceration, children in the third group only had significantly higher rates of juvenile delinquency and externalizing behaviors.

For all children, parental incarceration is a stressor. Those children with low risks of parental incarceration perceive parental incarceration as an event stressor. An event stressor is any unanticipated life changing event that is especially detrimental one's well-being. These children are impacted the most because of the social disruption and family instability the incarceration causes. Children who have prior experience with parental incarceration perceive it as a chronic stressor. Chronic stressors are a product of the social environment and have harmful effects on the people's well-being. Parental incarceration for high-risk children adds to the disadvantages that they are already facing. However, some children learn to cope with this stress, become resilient, and eventually succeed (Author, 2016; Joy et al., 2020).

Positive consequences of parental incarceration and positive attributes of the children affected by parental incarceration are not normally studied (Johnson et al., 2018). Wakefield and Powell (2016) argue that some parents would not contribute positively and do less harm when incarcerated. This is especially true in cases where a harmful father (as opposed to a helpful father) is incarcerated. For example, when harmful fathers who are violent are removed from the home, children tend to benefit. Despite this finding, alternatives to incarceration, such as substance abuse treatment are suggested. More research in this area is needed to uncover the exact beneficial means of parental incarceration (Billings, 2017). Based on that knowledge, policies could be made that will be more advantageous to the children.

Instead, there is a trend in the literature that focuses on exploring negative impacts. Billings (2017) further explored the idea that not only negative consequences occur as a product of parental incarceration. Positive impacts most likely appear when the negative role model is removed from the situation. It is also possible that positive consequences occur when the negative role models are removed and an abusive relationship ends or is escaped. Billings extends the work of Wakefield and Powell (2016) by examining the effect of maternal incarceration on female children. In discussing this relationship, Billings explains that an abusive mother is highly influential and if removed can allow more positive effects to transpire.

Billings (2017) attempted to tease out the long-term effects of parental incarceration from the short-term effects of parental arrests concerning academic achievement and behaviors (as measured by a behavior index and school crimes). The more times a child experienced a parent being arrested, the lower the average test scores, reading scores, and math scores, as well as the chances of graduating high school. However, parental *arrests* were positively related behavioral problems and school crimes. The exact opposite was true for the associations with parental incarceration. The longer a child experienced a parent being *incarcerated*, the higher their average test scores, reading scores, and math scores, as well as the likelihood that they would graduate from high school. Parental incarceration was also associated with fewer behavioral issues and school crimes. In sum, arrests tend to have a negative short-term effect on student educational outcomes and behavior. Incarceration, however, may have a positive long-term effect on the same outcomes. Hence, it is possible that the separation of the parent involved in incarceration served a protective function as compared to the reoccurring trauma associated with parental arrest (Johnson et al., 2018; Wakefield & Powell, 2016). But through what mechanism could parental incarceration have the possibility of positively impacting children's lives?

### **VICARIOUS REINFORCEMENT AND PUNISHMENT**

We propose one possible mechanism in terms of children learning from their parent's incarceration through vicarious reinforcement and punishment. Albert Bandura's social learning theory emphasizes the importance of observational learning or vicarious learning and modeling that affects the cognitive and behavioral processes of a person (1977). Observational learning occurs when observing people, situations, and events in an environment (Bandura, 1977). Modeling refers to the actors engaging in the observed behaviors. When observing the behaviors of models, behaviors may be reinforced based on their outcomes (Bandura, 1977). This seminal work is responsible for our understanding of how both aggression and moral disengagement is developed over time (Bandura, 1978; 1999).



Observational learning follows the logic of operational conditioning in which certain behaviors are more likely to reoccur or less likely to occur depending on the consequences. Behaviors can be positively or negative reinforced. Positive reinforcement is the result of a behavior being followed by favorable outcomes. Negative reinforcement relates to the strengthening of behaviors by avoiding an aversive stimulus. Vicarious punishment, an original concept by Bandura, is similar to operant conditioning with observations of consequences to others' behavior setting learning in motion. Since social learning operates under the basic assumption that people learn from other peoples' experiences, when the model is seen being punished for certain behaviors observers are more likely to inhibit the same type of behaviors to avoid undesired consequences (Bandura, 1977). In essence, the onlooker's behavior can be modified prospectively without engaging in the undesired behavior.

Applying Bandura's theory to parental incarceration, behaviors are negatively reinforced or vicariously punished. Parents are punished for undesirable behavior. Children whose parents are incarcerated observe the undesired consequences of criminal behaviors. In order to not follow their parent's footsteps, they change their own behaviors, including avoiding antisocial behavior. Instead, children of the incarcerated may engage in more socially positive behaviors, such as going to school and getting better grades to avoid failure, negative attention, trouble with the law, etc. (Joy et al., 2020). In other words, while socially positive behaviors increase, socially negative behaviors decrease. This translates to negative reinforcement of prosocial behavior. Bandura's idea of vicarious punishment can also be applied to the long-term effects of parental incarceration on children's test scores, behavior, and likelihood to graduate from high school (Billings, 2017).

Research revealed that children who have parents who have been, or are, incarcerated are more positively affected than children who have parents who have been arrested (Billings, 2017; Wakefield & Powell, 2016). In fact, these children were less likely to misbehave-in school or in general, have higher test scores, and exhibit lower high school drop-out rates. Vicarious punishment can be applied to this situation in the sense that children have experienced or seen the effects of criminal behavior on their parents; therefore, positive behaviors are reinforced. The model, the parent in this case, experiences the negative consequences of their actions. The child sees the consequences of the model's actions; thus, making it more likely that the child will inhibit similar behaviors in order to avoid experiencing the negative consequences observed (Bandura, 1977). Likewise, the child is likely to engage in socially acceptable behavior in contexts, like school, in order to reduce the likelihood of negative attention altogether. This may be especially prudent for children avoiding the well-documented stigma associated with a parent being incarcerated. By abiding by rules, norms, and regulations one

could fly under the radar, avoiding being labeled an “at-risk” child through the mechanism of vicarious reinforcement and punishment.

More recent research documents the vicarious mechanism in adult children of the incarcerated as they reflect on the effects. Young et al. (2020) documented how parental incarceration is perceived as a turning point for many children, a time to start taking school seriously. As a result, children of the incarcerated develop adaptive coping strategies and resilience against later challenges in life. Joy et al. (2020) found that through coping skills, like finding a positive role model, being involved in group activities at school, and embracing spirituality adult college students who experienced parental incarceration are very successful in college. For instance, college students who experience parental incarceration report more self-regulated learning strategies, like monitoring their comprehension and seeking help when needed, compared to their peers (Author, 2016). By learning from successful adult children of the incarcerated, effective intervention could be developed to promote resiliency and coping skill development. Although the research is just starting to emerge, more information is needed to test the theory of vicarious reinforcement and punishment in the case of parental incarceration.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The purpose of this article has been to summarize and apply the theories of vicarious reinforcement and punishment to recent research findings on the effects of parental incarceration on educational outcomes, as well as to underscore the need for effective interventions. To date, positive attributes of the children of the incarcerated have rarely been studied. Social workers and criminologists have primarily studied this population with the aims of providing immediate assistance or predicting future criminal behavior. Given the prevalence of parental incarceration, these children are likely served by psychologists, counselors, as well as educators (Turney, 2019). Even if it is a small percentage, many of these students do go on to postsecondary institutions (Author, 2016; Joy et al., 2020). Social learning theory has been used in past research to explain why the children of the incarcerated are more likely to commit crime. However, until now this explanation did not account for the children that do graduate high school, attend college, and resist criminal behavior. In addition, the effect of parental incarceration had not been examined in terms of learning outcomes other than high school graduation until recently.

Besides the negative outcomes associated with children of the incarcerated, not much is known about the children that are successful despite this possibly traumatic separation. Future research should contribute to the literature on parental incarceration by offering a psycho-educational perspective on possible safeguards and persistence in this population. For example, using anonymous surveys

researchers could examine individual characteristics, like academic motivation, persistence, and self-regulation, as well as any existing differences between college students that experienced parental incarceration and those that did not. In order to provide depth to any findings from the survey, qualitative data could help further investigate possible safeguards of parental incarceration among college students. Findings from such students could help institutions of higher learning better serve this population of future students.

In conclusion, even though parental incarceration presents certain challenges for children, such adversity may lead to resilience. Preliminary results from suggested future research will tell us how children of prisoners differ from their peers in terms of academic and motivational factors. Themes from potential interviews with the students may reveal psycho-educational safeguards in this population. Such research can help scholars and practitioners develop the interventions/programs necessary for college students that experience(d) parental incarceration. Our advice to practitioners is to be patient and support the children in a nonjudgemental manner (Turney, 2019). We highly recommend treating these children optimistically and discourage using labels that could potentially harm the child. Since they deal with more stress and strife than their peers, they may need additional help in school, therefore we urge you to be understanding of their situation (Turney, 2019).

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