WHAT FEELINGS DO CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS GO THROUGH?

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Conference paper

Manolita Hida

[1]*PhD in Psychology, Assistant Professor, "Aleksander Xhuvani" University, Albania*
Assistant Professor, University of Tirana, Albania
Psychologist at High Penitentiary Prison, Peqin, Albania
hidamanolita@gmail.com

Abstract

Separation due to the primary imprisonment may be a damaging form of separation for children because it is unexpected, sometimes violent **way** of arrest, unexplained, and often children are severely restricted to contacts with imprisoned parents. The research findings showed that: The children of imprisoned parents can isolate themselves and have little interest in friends and activities. They may be reluctant or refuse to leave home, go to school, or participate in the activities they once enjoyed. If a child's caretaker shows excessive stress, the child can take on adult roles or responsibilities, for example trying to be a "parent" for younger brothers and sisters. While trauma of parental imprisonment causes emotions and complex needs for each child, the impact severity will depend on a number of elements that influence as moderators of situations that will be shown by the children. The children of incarcerated parents usually experience intense feelings as they struggle to cope with many losses - not just their inmates but also the loss of their former life. This paper will provide a review of literature on emotional experiences of children with imprisoned parents. The most common feelings among these children are sadness, confusion and fear, abandonment, guilt, shame, and anger. This study had a time span from March 2013 to August 2017. The research project included a search on electronic records; bibliography review, contacts with people and groups of interests. The data was collected through the registration of abstracts, titled in scientific journals, dissertations, books and reports. The variables included in this review were coded in the main words that were deemed valid to pass the qualifying criteria. No response rate was applied to this study.

Keywords: imprisonment, children, influence, emotions

Introduction

Our parents are the first people we know and with whom we create our first bonds. They provide (of course there are exceptions) protection, security, love and food. However, society is part of a world that is constantly changing. These changes include an increase in the probability that children will live without the proper supervision of an adult and home that are volatile and violent. Children may happen to break away from family members; the situation is difficult when these members are a mother or father. Relationships are important building blocks for our families, the community, the state and the country. Thus, relations are affected by the economy, society, and individual factors of people involved. Children learn how to build and protect relationships by seeing how their parents and family interact with each other and society. Being a member of a family is important because it helps the feelings of confirmation and in developing the sense of identity and self-esteem. Changes within the family affect all family members. Domestic cohesion and harmony are defined as important variables in the development of a positive self-image, minimizing traumas and good coercive skills to cope with various problems and stressors (Napoli, Kilbride & Tebbs, 1992).
Families are unique social systems where their members are based on biological, legal, emotional, geographical and historical combinations. In contrast to other systems, entering a family system is performed through birth, adoption, development, and care or marriage and members can leave this system through death. Family members fulfill some specific roles that in themselves carry tasks ranging from physiological, emotional, security, affiliation etc. (Carr, A. (2006). Family Therapy-Concepts, Process and Practice, second Edition, Wiley Series in Clinical Psychology).

Everyone tries to meet his or her own needs and those of his or her child in the family. A family in which a parent's imprisonment has occurred need to analyze their level of needs. This is evident especially in cases where the inmate parent was the one who provided financial support, but was also the main emotional support, so family members remain at the level of physiological needs (Maslow's hierarchy needs). Consequently, when a family member leaves, children may feel lost in security. The family will need to reestablish and restore the sense of security.

Children who have a parent in prison experience feelings of anxiety, shame, sadness, sense of loss, social isolation, and guilt (Hagan, 2000).

In this form, the quality of parent-child relationship is a major factor in determining the extent to which parental imprisonment affects the child. Experts have agreed that positive parent-child attachment is important and essential for parents to take on their role in helping children to cooperate with social issues. The absence of parent-child relationships can cause irreparable damage to family bonds; for this reason, are encouraged face-to-face contacts and written communication. Another important factor is the parent-child relationship before the imprisonment. If the pre-existing relationship between parent and child has been positive, retention of relationships through early visits becomes essential.

Therefore, contacts with the incarcerated parent can bring benefits in long periods. However, for various reasons, children may have little or no contact with their parent in prison. Another side is that there may be children who show ambivalence and choose to forget the visits to protect themselves from further frustration. Consequently, they are not informed of the location and situation of the parent. Families may lie or cheat on parenting because they may feel ashamed of the family member's criminal behavior or because they may try to protect the child's psychological and emotional well-being. In cases where the child is young and fails to understand the concept of imprisonment, caretakers invent different stories to protect the child. Even when the goals of the caretakers are good, they lack the insight about the negative and dangerous consequences that the lie has to the child (Johnston, 1995).

Lies lead to confusion, lack of confidence and uncertainty. Children worry about that their parent may be in a very dangerous situation or may feel afraid that they themselves may disappear in the unknown. The child fills the gaps by fantasizing over the missing parent, preparing himself for the frustration that may be caused by the return of the parent who may be failing to meet the child's expectations. Caretakers may decide not to tell the truth even because of the society in which they live, because of the social stigma on criminal behavior. Depending on the cultural factors, most children are aware of the stigma that society places on criminal behavior, especially when it comes to the mother. Children with imprisoned parents feel embarrassed and may conclude that others may reject them because of their parents' behavior and actions. On the other hand, refusal is not an isolated behavior in society. Family and friends can reject these children, affecting furthermore the deterioration of their psycho-emotional state. Family members may feel angry with the law abuser because of their new position as a caretaker. To protect themselves, children tend to avoid rejection by withdrawing from important relationships. Young people can be self-centered and often can blame themselves for the criminal behavior of their parent. They feel especially guilty when a parent is being jailed for theft, drug sales, or prostitution in order to maintain the family. Children who carry this responsibility may have long-lasting psychological problems over time if their beliefs about persecution are persistent and are taken for granted. Young people while facing emotional and psychological problems can encounter misleading and rebellious behavior such as emotional departure from school, abstinence and drug abuse, dropping out and low academic performance, and behavioral problems. Children look for groups in which they are accepted, but unfortunately, this can be an adverse influence for them. Usually, these groups join gangs and engage in criminal activities with a minimum duration of two years leading to involvement in the juvenile or adult justice system. A new generation of children is at risk of intergenerational imprisonment (McQuaide & Ehrenreich, 1998). According to Springer et al. (2000), children with imprisoned parents are 5-6 times more vulnerable to involvement in the criminal justice system. Literature suggests that there is a greater probability that some of these young people will have cognitive deviations, regressions or deviations in development and improper co-operation strategies (Child Welfare League of America, 1998). They may exhibit difficulties in overcoming developmental tasks such as affiliation, development of trust, autonomy, initiative, productivity, and identity development (Seymour, 1998). Theoretically, when children have access to resources that help them to cooperate with developmental challenges, they successfully manage to develop these tasks. When challenges overcome the child's ability to cooperate, emotional survival becomes paramount, and the achievement of specific tasks is disrupted (Child Welfare League of America, 1998). Psychological effects can be long-lasting or immediate involving neurophysiological changes such as loss of speech after a parent ends up in jail. Children may suffer from depression, anxiety, and other serious emotional problems. Children of imprisoned parents reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder analogous to those of children whose parents died (Breen, 1995). There is space for discussion whether parental imprisonment may be more difficult to overcome compared to death, as death is a natural process and defines an end, while separation due to imprisonment is ambiguous. Children are disoriented in their feelings and are uncertain of how to

suffer the loss of a parent who is still alive but emotionally and physically absent (Breen, 1995). Researchers claim that when a child witnesses the arrest of a parent, is more prone to suffer from mental problems. They become confused or incapable to understand the consequences of arrest. Children may also have nightmares about the event. They may lose faith in the force of law and seeing it more as a threat than a protection for society (Miller, M, K. 2006. The Impact of Parental Incarnation on Children: An Emerging Need for Effective Interventions. Adolescent Social Work Journal, Vol. 23, No. 4). Relationships with the father are more based on activities and are characterized by instrumental involvement, from childhood games to watching television at the earliest age (Umberson, 2003). Although baby-to-child relationships have multiple dimensions, national research on the level of father's home involvement has found that children spend more time with their fathers in accompanying games (Yeung et al., 200 1; see also Collins, and Russell, 1991; Pleck, 2010; McBride and Mills, 1993). Hosley and Montemayor's (1997) study on father-to-child relationships also shows that young people engage in more leisure activities with fathers than with their mothers; watching TV is a typical example. In this way Fritsch and Burkhead's (1981) have come to the conclusion that the lack of a disciplinary person affects behavioral problems, usually abuse of alcohol. Children's react to the situation they face in the only way they know, through their behavior. Excessive stress can cause stomach and headache, boredom and health problems. When the stress level reaches its maximum, it can cause feelings of fatigue, frustration, and / or sadness or impudence (Channing, 1994).

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to make it possible to understand more clearly the situation of children who have one of the parents in prison and to answer the question "What Feelings Do Children of Incarcerated Parents Go Through?". The panorama of the imprisonment variable as well as the risk factors derived from it were attempted to be photographed.

The search period in documentary resources was extended between March 2013 and August 2017. Several strategies were used, which made the qualification of the material used in this study. It was examined about existing documents in Albanian language and on studies conducted in Albania. The sample was theoretical and obtained several conditions for inclusion in this study.

First, the work included search by electronic data. There were no restrictions in years.

Second, a review bibliography of previous studies was reviewed on how children experience parental imprisonment.

Third, people and interest groups were contacted, which could suggest directions and data that were not reviewed until that moment. Part of the data gathered from this strategy was to focus on rules and practices in penitentiary institutions that tend to become a regulator on the practices of meetings, but also programs that tried to encourage convicts in maintaining relations with their family and mainly with children and aiming to alleviate the image of the prison in which the children were visitors.

The theoretical sample included in the study was developed under several conditions:

First, the survey had to include data on the children of the convicts who before the moment of imprisonment had not suffered from mental health problems or had shown antisocial behavior.

Secondly, the study should include children of inmate parents who, after imprisonment, had problems that could be related to development, emotional, behavioral, or cognitive development.

Third, limitation would be the age, as all the studies that included the 10 to 18-year-old category would be considered important.

Fourthly, the studies used for this literature review could have been previously published or not.

Fifth, all the studies, which yielded significant data and were reported in English, Italian, and Spanish, would be included.

After setting the conditions for inclusion in the study, the exclusion criteria were also used. As such were:

- Studies in which recruited children were part of divorced families and the primary custodian enjoys freedom, were excluded.
- After the elimination of non-qualifying studies, the studies that were undergoing the review phase were identified. The most relevant research bibliographies in this area were used as sources of information.
- Thereafter, it moved to the electronic database research during the period March 2013 - August 2017. The key phrases were also an aid to this step.
- The method of collecting data was through the registration of abstracts, titles published in scientific journals, topics and dissertations, books and reports.
- Description of variables. The studies included in this review were coded in key words that were considered valid in this study and passed the qualifying criteria above.
- Response rate: not applicable in this study. The presence of measuring scales: no one.

Study findings

This study attempted to answer the research question raised at the beginning of the study through key terms.
Participants in the study describe their experiences regarding the reality of having a father in prison and how this affected their life cycle. Children described the moments of parent absence and what their absence in family means in terms of family roles, in which the oldest family son together with the mother already held the role of the head of the family who cares for family members and for the prisoner.
Parental imprisonment may also change the perception of children on punishment and the consequences of misbehavior, which in turn may affect their behavior. In cases where the children believed that the punishment of their parents was unfair, there was a hostile attitude towards authoritarian figures especially on the uniform. Also, their response persists in cases where imprisoned parents tried by themselves to explain to their children that they had made a mistake and now had to stay in that "place" until it was corrected. This explanation was usually given to younger children, aged 10-12 years.
An important role was also given to the children about the parent lack. Thinking about the child's protection, caregivers lie or say nothing about the imprisonment of their father. In cases where there is insufficient information about the absence of the parent, the children tend to blame themselves, increasing the risk of negative reactions such as self-isolating behavior, crying, ambiguity, fear. In cases where children and young people were aware of their parents' situation, they had less sense of confusion and were more inclined to communicate with other family members.
Active parenting is extremely difficult to reach in the prison context. Visit to the prison may also include long-distance travel disturbances, stressful prison procedures regarding the next reception, lack of physical contact during visits, and difficulty leaving the parent at the end of the visit. Visit to prison may intimidate children and young people, may cause discomfort and increase feelings of hostility to prison uniforms. Although efforts have been made to mitigate these effects through the "Parenting in Distance" program, visits are still problematic due to their procedures due to physical control, the visits monitoring and the presence of staff observing the meetings.
Children's reactions to parents' detention may vary according to the type of crime committed by their parents. Crimes that are considered in the social context as shameful or macabre exacerbate the effects of parental imprisonment for children. In the context of the Albanian society, acts such as theft, rape, juvenile abuse is considered ordinary crimes and shameful acts, whereas the offenses that are committed for family protection and the preservation of honor are seen with a fabulous vest and are exalted as a right and proper action. All this leads to the creation of stigma and stereotypes that are created by affecting directly the positioning of the child and youth in the community or social groups.
In a different perspective, community can also ease children if they are placed in groups with a high rate of detention in which children are more open about their moods and feelings and are less socially stigmatized. This is due to the fact that the prison population has increased among those four years (changes in the penal code and penalties for damages and offenses with low social risk, the opening of new prisons), and imprisonment turning into a commonplace community event and the stigma of imprisonment has been reduced. While for some of the cases in the study (included in the defense program), the community had problems as crime victims also lived there.

Discussions

The situation of parent detention negatively affects many aspects of child's life and development. It affects the social life of the child by leading it to radicalization due to social stigma and indirectly to low self-esteem because of the inability to meet the terms.
Shame and guilt are feelings that associate each other.
Children are often faced with the situation in which they have to take responsibility for the family and provide economic resources for survival of the family.
Of the cases included in the study, all children were aware of the parent's situation, but not everyone was aware of the offense for which their father was accused or sentenced.
The criminal offense also plays an important role in responding and attending children to the parent. Offences that are considered as shameful acts are accompanied by children's contempt; also acts such as theft are considered as shame and associated with the child's devaluation.

Study limits

The design of this study had its limits. One of these limitations is the champion who derives from literature.
Also, the age of the participants in the study was wide, which does not allow us to consider development issues in detail.
For reasons of convenience, the study included two groups: children with convicted parents and children with pre-detainees (pending a decision by the Court).
It would be reasonable to channel and narrow the scope of the study to produce results, which are represented by one and not two categories of subjects.
Until now, no study on a large-scale has tested the effects of parent-child contact in children during parental imprisonment.
Future Research needs to investigate the effects of parent-child contact during parental imprisonment, using longitudinal design, and looking for factors like parent-child relationship quality before imprisonment.
Parental-child relations and parental practices before imprisonment are also likely to affect how children react to the story. Parental imprisonment is more worrying for children who are more affiliated and positively involved with their parent before detention. In some cases, where children have experienced abusive relationships, children may also benefit from parental imprisonment.
The effects of what children are told about their parents' imprisonment should be studied in longitudinal studies.

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