Monique Crawford

Nursing 4110:Urban Nursing

Mass Incarceration and the Public Health Crisis

Reuniting Children with Mothers Reentering from Prison

October 28, 2016

Professor K. Falk

Incarceration by definition means the state of being confined to jail or prison (google.com); and parental incarceration refers to any kind of custodial confinement of a parent by the criminal justice system (Murray, Farrington, Sekol, 2011, pg 175). Equally by the same definition, the important difference is the hidden victims of these unfortunate circumstances. That is the child or children these parents leave behind. According to Murray, children with incarcerated parents have been referred to as “the forgotten victims of crime”, “the orphans of injustice”, and “the unseen victims of the prison boom” (Murray et al 2011, pg 175). In general, people tend to look at the effects that incarceration has on the individuals themselves, but far too often, how their children deal with it is never brought to light. There are a multitude of effects that comes with this life changing event, they include but are not limited to loneliness, the daunting explanation of why incarceration occurred, caregiver arrangements, the sometimes traumatic separation, financial strains, possible changes in home school life, and most importantly, dealing with the stigma of having an incarcerated parent. The United States has the largest prison population in the world and has the highest rate of imprisonment, 756 per 100,00 (Murray et al, pg 176). The number of children with a parent in state or federal prison increased from 950,000 in 1991 to 1.7 million in 2007; this is a very alarming statistic (Schlafer & Poelmann, 2010, pg 395). Another fact that tends to be neglected is which parent has been incarcerated. From a stereotypical perspective, people generally assume that the imprisoned parent is the father, however, this is obviously not always the case. This brings about the purpose of my paper. In terms of mass incarceration, I have looked into research that has explained the mental and behavioral impact that parental incarceration, specifically of mothers, has had on their children. Some of this research has even shed light on the issues women face when it comes to reentering back into society as well in their children’s lives. Mothers are often seen as the more loving parent and the main caregiver, this paper will cover some of the major downfalls of having an imprisoned mother, as well as cover some of the challenges and barriers they face when entering back into society.

 The targeted groups focused on in this paper are both incarcerated mothers/women and the children they leave behind. According to the Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling, one of the main contributing factors of criminality leading to incarceration of women is psychiatric disorder (Mcphail, Falvo, Burker, 2012). One frightening statistic showed that in 1977, the United States imprisoned 11,212 women, but by 2004 this number had increased to 96,125. One of the main reasons for this increase has been the closing of psychiatric hospitals in the 1970s. Since then, prisons have become a “better” alternative for housing women with mental illness (Mchpail et al, 2012). The Bureau of Justice statistics in 2005 reported that 70% of women entering jail in 2002 reported using alcohol or drugs weekly in the months before getting arrested (Scott & Dennis, 2012, pg 110). This should then be no surprise that women offenders with substance use disorders also suffer from other co-occurring conditions including psychiatric disorders. This puts them at a higher risk for relapse as well as recidivism after reentry into the community. Recidivism is a fundamental concept of the criminal justice system, which refers to a persons relapse back into criminal behavior (google.com). These women offenders tend to live below the poverty line, have little no to formal education, are homeless, tend to be single parents, have a family history of substance abuse, and have a history of mental illness (Scott & Dennis, 2011, pg 111). On the other side of the mirror comes the hardships family members face, especially their children.

 As anyone can assume, having an incarcerated parent can pose many negative outcomes in a child’s life. Some of these outcomes include possible mental and behavioral adversities, negative impact on educational performance, possibly turning to illicit drug use, and also following a life of criminal behavior (Murray et al 2011, pg 176). These could also be due to false expectations by others as well as from internal stigmatization. Of the many possible consequences that can be produced from parental incarceration, I chose to focus on the stigmatization the child might feels as a results of having the parent in jail, as well as behavioral outcomes that might stem from the issue. Stigmatization often involves associating something or someone with negative attributes (Phillips & Gates, 2011). With this thought, it is understandable why many children might experience real stigmas from those around them, or perceive themselves negatively based on the fact that they have an incarcerated parent. This can become an issue in the child’s life with negative repercussions such as antisocial behavior (Phillips & Gates, 2011). Children are more aware of the negative stereotypes and discrimination that comes with having a parent in jail than we like to think. Subsequently, to avoid this, they often choose to keep this a secret. In a conceptual framework for understanding stigmatization of children, Susan Phillips and Trevor Gates expresses that in order to avoid these stigmas, families with an incarcerated parent sometimes choose to conceal the imprisonment. However, they are advised to share this information with others, “children worry about how they and their parents will be viewed, school phobias, non-attendance, being teased, rejected or attacked by peers, particularly in the first few weeks of the arrest are some of the possibilities of disclosing this information” (Phillips and Gates, 2011). Families are advised to share this information because it might lead to supportive as well as affirming relationships with other children or people in similar circumstances (Phillips and Gates, 2011). Another perceived stigma is the belief that “the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree”. Social biases can arise from disclosure of this information, viewing children as being “just like their parents” especially when conviction is known, eg. murder, robbery (Phillips and Gates, 2011). As stated before, children can internalize these stigmas, which can provide feelings of shame, or fear of being judged or viewed in a negative way. Studies of various groups of stigmatized children have found that those who internalize negative societal attitudes about a group to which they belong are more likely to have lower self-esteem, and higher rates of various mental and physical health problems, as well as behavioral problems (Phillips and Gates, 2011).

 A systemic review was conducted to establish evidence on the association between parental incarceration and children’s later antisocial behavior, mental health problems, drug use, and educational performance. Results from 40 students were used in a meta-analysis. Objectives of the systematic review included to what extent incarceration was associated with the problems previously listed. Did the association vary across different types of samples (children in the community compared to children in the clinics /courts). Did parental incarceration produce worse outcomes compared to other forms of parent-child separation. In order for studies to be included in the meta-analysis, five inclusion criteria had to be met. Three of which included: children’s outcomes were measured after parental incarceration first occurred, the study included children of incarcerated parents and at least one comparison group of children without incarcerated parents, and the study use the same outcome measure for children with incarcerated parents and the comparison group. The studies could have been published or unpublished as well as conducted in any country around the world. Results from the 40 studies were used which included 7347 children with incarcerated parents and 37,325 comparison children. The overall results of this systematic review was that parental incarceration is associated with higher risk of antisocial behavior, but not for mental health problems, drug use, or poor educational performance (Murray et al, 2012, pg 192). For more clarity, the article referred to antisocial behavior as externalizing problems, which are a “wide variety of behaviors that violate social norms or laws (Murray et al, 2012, pg 193). They include persistent lying and deceit, and criminal behavior. Mental health problems in this review referred to as internalizing problems such as anxiety and depression (Murray et al, 2012, pg 193). Even though the results of most studies included in this meta-analysis support that parental incarceration can lead to behavior problems, the article states that limitations were evident. Limitations included the fact that none of the studies used randomized experimental designs and most of the studies were based on children of incarcerated fathers. This yields the assumption that less is known about the impact on children’s lives from maternal incarceration compared to paternal incarceration.

 As children are left home with caregivers to grow up in a world without their parents, whether temporarily or permanently, there are obstacles many parents themselves must face. When it comes to temporary imprisonment, the first and major obstacle is reentry back into society. This paper is focused mainly on incarcerated women; and as stated earlier, most women whom are incarcerated have psychiatric problems or suffer from substance abuse, making recidivism an unfortunate pitfall. According to Jennifer Cobinna of Michigan State University, female prisoners have multifaceted needs that are very different from those of men after release from jail or prison. These needs are stemmed from victimization, substance addiction, mental illness, and economic instability (Cobinna, 2010, pg 212). Many studies have revealed that post-release participation in community based treatment programs can improve outcomes. The major problem is that these studies have mostly been conducted on male offenders (Scott and Dennis, 2012, pg 112). These treatment programs could be a head start for many women upon reentry back into their environment after they have been released. Potential interventions can include case management, along with psychotherapy, as well as job assistance programs. With this groundwork, women would be placed in more favorable positions that could ensure success rather than failure. In an article “Drug and Alcohol dependence by Scott and Denis, an experiment was conducted which examined the impact of monthly recovery management checkups (RMC) in the first 90 days post release from jail. It included 480 women offenders, which were randomly assigned to either the control group or a management check group. The RMC group participated in check ups at 30, 60, and 90 days. According to the article, the theory behind this work was that through monthly regulatory check ups, early intervention would detect relapse into possible drug abuse or criminal behavior. This early detection could possibly halt that progression, reducing the chance of going back to jail. These check ups served a preventative role in the lives of these women. Results of the study showed that women who received the RMC were significantly more likely to participate in community based substance abuse treatment programs, which reduced relapse rates (Scott and Dennis, 2012, pg 112). The article concluded that the experiment was effective in finding what could possibly assist women with their reentry, however, 90 days is not enough to help a women with a chronic history of substance abuse, especially if they have co-occurring conditions such as mental illnesses. These recovery management checkups would be a step in the right direction. Substance abuse being the number one culprit in the cycle of reentry, relapse, and recidivism needs to be the issue tackled once a woman has been released. It can prevent some from completing their education, securing employment, getting proper housing, and providing proper parenting to their children. Treatment programs would be the most effective step in stopping this repetitive cycle.

 In New York, there are two programs that have yielded much success for women returning home from prison. These programs are geared specifically for mothers and their children. It is operated by a Catholic nun, by the name of sister Teresa Fitzgerald, called Hour Children and My Mothers house. The Hour Children organization is a program that helps mothers gain their independence, by helping them find jobs that later helps them raise their children (Flores, 2000). “In the program, there are two different kinds of houses, one has children whose mothers are still in prison, and the second house unites mothers with their children, with the intentions of them eventually gaining independence. The mothers live in the house under supervision, until they are able to find a job and secure another place of residence” (Flores, 2000). Sister Fitzgerald states that the programs truly works, and through counseling women were able to get back on their feet. With the proper encouragement, help and support, the challenges and barriers that women often face upon release can be overcome with the right foundation upon reentry. The downside to the program is that it is privately funded, and it only admits first time offenders. According to the Queens tribune, this organization has gone into debt, but due to generous donations, they were able to purchase four homes to continue the program (Flores, 2000). This is where stakeholders, politicians, and health administrators could come in and make a difference. With success stories formulated from Hour Children and My Mothers house, if the right people and organizations took real interest in keeping these women out of the system, funding through grants can help keep programs like this afloat. These programs could be provided on a larger scale, reducing the amount of women going back into prison, as well as increasing the amount of children being raised by their mother and not by the system. Children are five times more likely to be placed in foster homes when the mother is incarcerated than when their father is incarcerated (Mignon and Ransford, 2012, pg 71). Making the right investments cuts the cost of foster care, while reducing the social and emotional implications that these children later turned adults usually face when they have bounced from home to home all their lives. On youtube, there is a video titled “How the Formerly Incarcerated Re-Enter Society”, former inmate Nars Simpson has been working on providing reentry homes for other former male inmates post release from prison. He states, “if a man doesn’t have housing, he doesn’t have anything. If I have a house, I can wake up in the morning and look for a job, if I have a job and nowhere to sleep, then what?” (The Atlantic, 2015). This applies to their women counterparts as well. This is why programs like My mothers house can be a great investment for city officials to help former inmates get on their feet.

Secondary to housing, another obstacle most people face after leaving prison is applying for a job. On each application, a person must disclose by checking a box, whether or not they have ever been convicted of a crime. Answering yes to this question has been a determinant factor for that person getting the job or not. An international campaign by civil rights groups have launched “Ban the box”, which advocates for employers to remove the question from applications in the hiring process (google.com). Policy changes like these can make a big difference in the lives of many ex-offenders. There are both pros and cons to this recommendation; however, it would certainly give hope to those who are discouraged from seeking employment because they are forced to explain their convictions, which can be oppressive and humiliating. Banning the box could give both men and women a chance at starting over, thereby, being able to provide for themselves and their children.

 Being convicted of a crime can be a life altering experience, which signifies change for not only the individual but also everyone in which they have close relational ties. Our reality has forced us to automatically equate the term prisoner/convict with the male gender, leaving us to forget about women. Women who have fallen victim to confinement in the judicial system sometimes face more daunting circumstances when it comes to reentry back into their society. With issues such as substance abuse and psychiatric disorders, the road to recovery has been even more challenging when it comes to getting back into the lives of their children. Studies have shown results of why reentry programs are needed more than ever, but there are still not enough to suffice for the alarming increase in female imprisonment that has spiked in the past few decades. We must first recognize that substance abuse and mental illnesses are diseases, and not a crime. Policy and lawmakers must first start here. While children are also falling victims to their parent’s convictions as well, it is up to the government to help stop this cycle of reentry, relapse, and recidivism.

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