

**Development of deviant behavior in children with incarcerated parents – a cry for help
or reproduction of parental behavior.**

Comparative analysis of the consequences of maternal and paternal incarceration

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***Abstract:** The issue of children of people deprived of their liberty has gained particular popularity in recent years. The report examines the results of a study conducted on the factors that influence the development of deviant behavior and, more specifically, the parental incarceration. Furthermore, it compares the deviations in behavior that develop in children with incarcerated fathers and children with incarcerated mothers. The comparative analysis is done from the point of view of the fact that children show extremely different manifestations in this situation. The results are considered and interpreted in the context of the existing scientific studies on the specified problem.*

***Key words:** parents deprived of their liberty, children, deviant behavior*

Introduction

Parental incarceration as a predictor of the development of deviant behavior has been examined in the literature basically through the mechanisms of reproduction of parental behavior and through the mechanisms of genetic factors. [1]

Scientists have determined that parental incarceration leads to multiple consequences that affect children throughout their lives. These consequences include poor economic status, poor health, and poor mental health. [2]

The authors associate parental incarceration to children's behavioral abnormalities and criminal behavior, both during adolescence and young adulthood. [3]

Midgley, E. K. and Lo, C. C. (2013) have conducted a longitudinal study with adolescents aged between 10 and 14 years in order to determine the impact of parental incarceration on children's emotional state, substance abuse, and delinquency. The results showed that parental incarceration plays a significant role in children's problematic behavior. The authors have not determined the exact mechanism by which deviant behavior develops in adolescents whose parents are incarcerated. According to them, it is a type of social mechanism. [4]

According to Phillips, S. D. and Dettlaff, A. J. (2009), children from families with an incarcerated parent have higher rates of substance use, domestic violence, and life in poverty than families without an arrested parent. They also write that it is necessary to pay attention to the well-being of the children and their safety when working with families with an incarcerated parent. [5]

Geller et al., 2009 have found that parental incarceration is associated with externalizing behavior in early childhood, mostly in the form of aggressive behavior, attention problems, and delinquency. [6] Other authors have associated parental incarceration with marijuana use even in adolescence [7], while others have associated it with theft within the age ranging between 7 and 22 years. [8]

Materials and methods

The study that is presented here is part of a larger study that aims to identify factors that are influential on children's behavioral deviations. It focuses on parental care, some individual and psychosocial factors. The study includes 112 cases of children with deviant behavior, with whom I have been working as a specialist in my practice during the period 2022 - 2024.

The following methods were used: Active observation; Interview; Conversation; Case study; Analysis of administrative records.

The factors related to deviant behavior were derived on the basis of the above-mentioned methods for all 112 children.

A database is developed that includes all antisocial acts and crimes committed by children and all factors that have been derived through research methods.

After the database was prepared, a correlation analysis was done, for which the following steps were followed:

1. To determine the independent variables (factors) X and the dependent variable Y (effect).
2. To select an appropriate correlation coefficient in relation to the statistical scale to which the examined variables pertain.
3. To evaluate the tightness of correlational relationship.
4. To evaluate the statistical importance of the received coefficient.
5. To interpret the received results.

The results were processed with SPSS v. 26.0 by using a contingency correlation coefficient given the fact that the variables are located on a nominal measurement statistical scale.

Results and Discussion

Deviant behavior of children whose father is incarcerated

According to Maruschak et al., 2021, fathers represent around 93% of incarcerated parents, but nevertheless there is a lack of sufficient study that represent children and their behavior after their parent has been incarcerated. [9], [10]

For example, Dallaire DH et al. 2015, has examined the connection between paternal incarceration and the development of deviant behavior of children through factors such as environment, genetics, behavioral imitation, and the intergenerational transmission of delinquency [11]

Table 1 presents the behavioral deviations that the children in our study have developed.

They indicate that hooliganism, arson, aggressive behavior, and coercion have the highest levels of dependency.

All acts are related to the root of aggression to a certain extent. We can assume that children with an incarcerated father are angry. They are angry at what is happening to them, at the difficulties they are experiencing, angry due to the absence of the parent.

Deviant acts	r ¹	p ²
Aggressive behavior	0,203	0,029
Arson	0,217	0,019
Hooliganism	0,237	0,010
Compulsion	0,188	0,043

Table 1 Correlative dependency between paternal incarceration and deviant acts

This has been confirmed by Wildeman, C. (2008), who conducted a study of 4,898 families with children whose fathers have been incarcerated. He has determined higher levels of aggression regarding these children compared to children whose fathers have not been

¹ r – correlation coefficient

² p – level of importance

incarcerated. [12] Geller et. al. (2009) have confirmed the data. According to them, children of fathers in prison have higher levels of problems than those whose fathers are absent from their lives due to separation from their mother or death. [6]

However, little has been considered about the issue of the deprivation of liberty of a parent and the experiences of the other parent and the child. The grief for the lost parent, the fear, the shame... and what exactly is the impact of this situation on the emotional world of the child and the parent who remains with it.

According to Eddy J.M. and Poehlmann-Tynan J. 2019, when studying the links between parental incarceration and emerging problems regarding children, it is exceedingly important to examine the age of the children. Since children go through many physiological and mental changes, it is logical that the effects would be different depending on the age of the child. [13]

In this context, some authors have tracked children's development years after they began their research.

A study by Murray et al., 2007 has established a very interesting pattern, namely that the incarceration of the father before the birth of the child is associated with crime during the 19th year of the respective young person. [14]

Other scientific studies have proved the negative effects on children in early childhood and adolescence. For example, child incarceration is directly related to problem behavior of children aged between 5 and 9 years and juvenile delinquency, and simultaneously it is negatively related to father involvement. In turn, high level of father involvement during the child's 9th year is negatively related to juvenile delinquency. [10]

Here we already realize the relationship between the paternal incarceration and his involvement with the child. The studies orientate us to the main predictor, namely that the child is deprived of the care and interaction with his father. This thesis has also been confirmed by Dwyer, E., 2018. [15]

Many scientists have proved that father incarceration leads to mental health and behavioral problems, but this is often attributed to financial problems and caregiver stress. However, the causal relationships of how these conditions occur remain unclear. If we look at these processes in this way: if the caregiver's stress is caused by the father's incarceration and this leads to a deterioration in the quality of the caregiver-child relationship, then we can actually see and understand the deterioration in mental health and behavioral problems of children. [16]

Bradshaw D., et al. 2021 have developed this thesis by proving that depressive symptoms disrupt the mother-child relationship, which also affects the child's interaction with its coevals. [17]

According to Anderson, A.J., et al. 2024, behavioral problems may be shaped by the disruptions that occur in the family due to the paternal incarceration and also basically pay attention to the inability of the father to be involved in the family, since father involvement is seen as a fundamental part of shaping the child's development. These factors can have a particularly strong impact during the transition to adolescence and increase the risk of developing criminal behavior. [10]

Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011 have confirmed the difficulties that are caused by the lack of father involvement by adding lack of relationships, reduction of resources, stress of the other parent. [18]

Herreros-Fraile A., et al. 2023 have reported about other mechanisms that have been influential on the deviations in the behavior of children of incarcerators. According to them, the mental state of the mother deteriorates, the quality of her parenting deteriorates, the child is more often subjected to corporal punishment, the interactions between the parents and the child decrease, which in turn is closely related to deviant behavior. We can imagine the life situation in which there is a child with an incarcerated father and an emotionally unstable mother, who, for example, is using physical force on the child. The child is in hopelessness and helplessness. Therefore, several factors accumulate, which definitely play a significant role in the development of deviations in behavior. [16]

An additional perspective has been offered by Johnson and Waldfogel, 2002, namely the stigma that the child and the family endure after the paternal incarceration. This stigma certainly has a negative impact on the child's emotional state, by making it experience feelings of guilt and shame. Here, scientists also deduce the influence of self-labeling. In fact, children tend to accept the stigma and comply with it. [19], [20]

Despite all that I stated above, some scientists have discovered the so-called buffers. If a child is provided with a stable, understanding, calm family environment, with functioning parenting strategies, it is very possible that this will have a positive impact on the child's mental world during difficult periods of life. These strategies, applied to children whose parent is incarcerated, show successful results. [21]

The conclusion we can draw is that paternal incarceration is a predictor of deviant behavior, but rather the mechanism of action refers to the influence of the life difficulties the

child goes through as a result of the imprisonment - the relationship with the mother, her psychological well-being, the emotional atmosphere at home, the stigma in society.

The increasing number of incarcerated fathers worldwide has raised concerns about the children of these men. International organisations have been created to support the bond between the child and the father while he is serving his incarceration.

For example, the organisation Parenting Inside Out, which studies the changes that occur when children and fathers are given the opportunity to maintain contact with each other. The study results have determined that in addition to the positive emotional state of children and parents, positive results were also found in terms of the parent's criminality, namely that the parent was less likely to become a recidivist - with a 32 to 41 percent and a 29 percent reduction in criminal behavior compared to that of the criminal group. [22]

Deviant behavior in children whose mother is incarcerated

Many scientists have studied the impact of parental incarceration on children. However, few studies have examined the differences between paternal and maternal incarceration, and when they do, studies have focused basically on paternal incarceration, as over 90% of the prisoners are male.

Children whose mothers, rather than fathers, have been incarcerated, are experiencing greater difficulties, given that mothers are often the primary caregiver and, respectively, the primary attachment figure, and mothers are more often the ones raising the child single-handedly. [11]

Table 2 presents the behavioral deviations that children in our study develop when their mother is serving a prison sentence.

They show that the highest levels of addiction are robbery, suicidal acts, drug possession, prostitution, and drug use.

We see that the acts are different in nature, related to both internalizing problems, such as suicidal behavior, for example, and externalizing ones, such as robbery.

We can hypothesize that the deprivation of the mother's liberty triggers various problems. Some of them are related to the experience of anxiety, the absence of the primary caregiver leads the child to a path that they want to end. The absence of the mother's love triggers behaviors through which the child seeks to escape this lack or to obtain it through psychoactive substances. The rage from what has happened leads them to the desire to impose force.

Deviant act	r	p
Suicidal acts	0,258	0,005
Robbery	0,283	0,002
Prostitution	0,202	0,029
Drug possession	0,230	0,012
Drug use	0,179	0,050

Table 2 **Correlational dependence between paternal imprisonment and deviant acts**

As I mentioned above, the mother is often the primary or sole caregiver for children, and when she is incarcerated, many children find themselves in a situation where they are placed elsewhere, for examples with relatives or some type of social service. Furthermore, these children are in a situation where they may experience high levels of poverty, multiple relocations, and low level of academic achievement.

Many scientists have confirmed the risks associated with children of incarcerated mothers. Dallaire, D., 2007, indicates that they are exposed to higher risks of antisocial behavior, Lee et al. 2013, write about health problems, both mental and physical. [23], [24] Dallaire, D. et al., 2015, associate maternal imprisonment to both internalizing problem behavior and its externalization, substance use by children, which is confirmed in our study. [11], [25]

There is ample evidence that these children have higher levels of anxiety, depression, and aggression. Furthermore, some scientists have shown that the children of these mothers are nearly three times more likely to be incarcerated too when they grow up. [26], [11]

The literature lacks in-depth studies on the exact mechanism by which maternal imprisonment has its influence.

Some authors talk about the experience of traumatic events to which the child is subjected, as well as the mechanism by which separation from attachment figures operates. We mentioned above that it is often possible for the child to be looked after by someone else, and this can sometimes be a person or people whom the child does not even know. Furthermore, through multiple relocations of the home, school, separation from close people and lack of contact, this could have influence on the development of behavioral abnormalities. [11] In such a situation, the child will have to adapt to many novelties at once, which on one hand will put it in a situation in which the mother is missing, and on the other hand it will experience the lack of the other components of its life up to the current moment.

More thorough studies are needed to analyze the problems that appear with the emotional state of the child when the mother is. However, we can consider that the stress that the children are subjected to in such a situation in their life journey definitely has a negative impact, and my observations are that the main path for the development of behavioral abnormalities is the separation from the primary caregiver.

Conclusions

The results of the study show extremely different consequences of paternal incarceration and maternal incarceration.

Deviant acts associated with paternal incarceration are exclusively aggressive and directed towards others. While deviant acts in an incarcerated mother are diverse, but in this case the child rather directs the harm towards itself, i.e. the behavior becomes self-destructive, through suicidal behaviors, drug use, prostitution. Only robbery is the act that is directed towards others.

It is striking that the literary review focuses on circumstances that occur around the deprivation of parental liberty, rather than on the deprivation of liberty itself as a fact and predictor of deviant behavior.

In terms of paternal incarceration, scientists have focused mainly on the fact that the father's commitment to the child is lacking. In terms of maternal incarceration, the problems are mainly related to the fact that the child suffers for the main attachment figure, that he will have to adapt to many new and often unpleasant facts in its life.

All this shows us that it is actually important what exactly stands behind a factor related to deviant behavior. It tells us that we need to reflect on all the other circumstances surrounding the child, and not just on what seems to be the most significant at first glance.

Most importantly, we see that the presence of strong relationships, a supportive remaining parent or relatives, assistance in adapting to life with an incarcerated parent, the presence of understanding from society, and the absence of stigma would actually lead to a significant reduction in the risks contributing to the development of behavioral abnormalities in children whose parents are serving a prison sentence.

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