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**EVIDENCE-BASED PROGRAMS FOR
CHILDREN OF PRISONERS****JOSEPH MURRAY****DAVID P. FARRINGTON**

Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, U.K.

With fast growing prison populations around the world, children are increasingly exposed to parental imprisonment. In the United States, the population of children under 18 with an imprisoned parent grew from 0.9 million in 1991 to 1.5 million in 1999 (Mumola, 2000). In England and Wales, approximately 125,000 children experience parental imprisonment each year, compared with about 170,000 children who experience parental divorce (Murray, 2006). Many researchers have suggested that parental imprisonment might harm children, but there have been few high-quality studies of these effects. Accordingly, the effects of parental imprisonment on children “may be the least understood and most consequential implication of the high reliance on incarceration” (Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999:122).

The study published in this issue by Phillips et al. (2006) shows that parental imprisonment is associated with family economic strain, and instability in children’s care and living arrangements, even after controlling for parental substance abuse, parental mental health problems, and low education. Their analyses are based on the Great Smoky Mountains Study (a longitudinal survey of over 1,400 children in North Carolina), which is an extremely important and impressive prospective longitudinal survey of the development of antisocial behavior in children. The main policy issue raised by their study is that imprisoning parents may harm children’s family environments and contribute to children’s adverse outcomes through the life-course.

Given the likely harms of parental imprisonment, intervention programs are needed to prevent adverse outcomes for children of prisoners. However, without a sound scientific basis, even well-intentioned interventions can be ineffective, and they may sometimes even cause harm (McCord, 2003). Support programs for children of prisoners have rarely been well evaluated, using randomized controlled trials. Therefore, little is known about their effectiveness. Pending further evidence, policies should be developed based on the best knowledge about the causes of adverse outcomes for children of prisoners. Depending on what causes these

adverse outcomes, different interventions and public policies will be needed.

To consider which programs might best protect children of prisoners from adverse outcomes, we review evidence relating to three questions:

1. What are the risks for children of prisoners?
2. Does parental imprisonment cause adverse outcomes for children?
3. How might parental imprisonment cause adverse outcomes for children?

Because of limited space, we do not discuss other important policy issues related to parental imprisonment, such as the conditions under which children might benefit from it (Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999) and the legal rights of prisoners to maintain custody over their children (Lewis, 2004).

WHAT ARE THE RISKS FOR CHILDREN OF PRISONERS?

Early studies suggested that parental imprisonment was associated with a range of difficulties for children: missing the imprisoned parent, sadness, withdrawn behavior, sleep problems, aggressive behavior, deteriorating school performance, truancy, and sometimes delinquency (Friedman and Esselstyn, 1965; Moerk, 1973; Sack, 1977; Sack et al., 1976). Since then, other small-scale projects have continued to document children's psychosocial difficulties during parental imprisonment (see Murray, 2005, for a review). However, these studies rarely used control groups, standardized measures, or longitudinal designs. As such, the relative risks for children after parental imprisonment were not known. Recently, two longitudinal studies, using appropriate control groups and standardized measures, showed that parental imprisonment does indeed predict high rates of criminal behavior and mental health problems through the life-course.

In the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (the Cambridge Study, an English longitudinal study of 400 males), we investigated the effects of parental imprisonment on boys' antisocial behavior and delinquency between ages 14 and 40 (Murray and Farrington, 2005). Of boys who were separated because of parental imprisonment in their first 10 years of life, 48% were convicted as adults, compared with 14% of boys whose parents were not imprisoned (and who were not separated from parents for other reasons). In the Cambridge Study, separation because of parental imprisonment also predicted mental health problems through the life-course, even up to age 48 (Murray and Farrington, 2006).

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In Project Metropolitan (a Swedish longitudinal study of 15,000 children), parental imprisonment in the children's first six years of life predicted their adult offending behavior, for both males and females (Murray et al., 2006). Of children with imprisoned parents, 25% offended between ages 19 and 30, compared with 12% of children without convicted parents. Thus, parental imprisonment was also a risk factor for criminal behavior in Sweden.

Identifying risk factors is an important step toward developing policies to reduce crime and mental health problems (Farrington, 2000; Farrington and Welsh, 2007; Kazdin et al., 1997). By decreasing a risk factor (in this case, parental imprisonment), children's crime and mental health problems might be reduced. Many commentators have recommended using alternatives to prison sentences to protect children from the harms of parental imprisonment (see, e.g., Bernstein, 2005; Council of Europe, 1997; Standing Committee on Social Issues, 1997). However, a critical issue is whether parental imprisonment is a risk factor because it causes problems for children, or because it is an indicator of background disadvantage. If parental imprisonment does not cause children's problems, reducing the incidence of parental imprisonment will not improve children's outcomes.

DOES PARENTAL IMPRISONMENT CAUSE ADVERSE OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN?

Children of prisoners might be at risk because of preexisting disadvantages in their lives, not because parental imprisonment is harmful for children. Prisoners are more likely than the general population to be unemployed, to be of low social class, to have multiple mental health problems, many criminal convictions, marital difficulties, and their own experiences of abuse and neglect (Dodd and Hunter, 1992; Lynch et al., 1994; Singleton et al., 1998). As two prospective longitudinal studies now show, children of prisoners also experience higher levels of social disadvantage than their peers (Murray and Farrington, 2005; Phillips et al., 2006). Thus, it is necessary to consider whether parental imprisonment harms children, over and above the effects of background adversities.

In the Cambridge Study, we investigated whether parental imprisonment predicted children's antisocial behavior and mental health problems, controlling for other childhood risk factors, such as parental criminality, family poverty, poor parenting, and low child IQ. Although the effects of parental imprisonment were reduced after controlling for other childhood risk factors, parental imprisonment nevertheless significantly predicted antisocial and mental health problems through the life-course (Murray

and Farrington, 2005; 2006). These findings are consistent with the idea that parental imprisonment causes adverse outcomes for children.

However, in Project Metropolitan (Sweden), parental imprisonment did not predict children's offending behavior after taking into account the effects of parental criminality (Murray et al., 2006). This suggests that parental imprisonment did not cause children's offending in Sweden; rather, parental criminality explained the association between the two. We speculated that, unlike in England, Swedish children may have been protected from the adverse effects of parental imprisonment by more family-friendly prison policies, a welfare-oriented juvenile justice system, an extended social welfare system, and more sympathetic public attitudes toward crime and punishment.

There is no experimental evidence on which to draw firm conclusions about the causal effects of parental imprisonment on children. Given the best available evidence, it seems that parental imprisonment might cause problems for children in some contexts but not in others. This variability suggests that social policy reform could prevent harmful effects of parental imprisonment in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom.

HOW MIGHT PARENTAL IMPRISONMENT CAUSE ADVERSE OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN?

Programs for children of prisoners should be based on a clear understanding of the mechanisms linking parental imprisonment and children's psychopathology. If the wrong mechanisms are targeted in policy interventions, the harmful effects of parental imprisonment on children will not be prevented. We discuss four key mechanisms that might link parental imprisonment and adverse child outcomes, and we briefly comment on the policies implied by each theory. Because of limited space, we focus on individual and family level theories linking parental imprisonment with adverse outcomes for children (see Clear et al., 2001; Rose and Clear, 2003, on the effects of imprisonment on communities).

TRAUMA OF PARENT-CHILD SEPARATION

Parental imprisonment might cause adverse outcomes for children because parent-child separation is harmful for children (Fritsch and Burkhead, 1981; Kampfner, 1995; Moerk, 1973; Poehlmann, 2005; Richards, 1992). Parent-child separation may be one of the most important components of the "instability" construct used by Phillips et al. The idea that parent-child separation is harmful for children is suggested by attachment theory, which was originally developed by John Bowlby (1969; 1973; 1980).

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Consistent with attachment theory, in a study of 54 children with imprisoned mothers, Poehlmann (2005) found that children typically showed sadness and called for their mothers after separation, and 63% had insecure attachment representations of their mothers.

Separation because of parental imprisonment might be particularly harmful for children because it is often unexpected, sometimes violent, often unexplained, and children are severely restricted in their contact with imprisoned parents (Bernstein, 2005; Poehlmann, 2005; Shaw, 1987). If separation because of parental imprisonment is particularly harmful for children, children of prisoners should have worse outcomes than children separated from parents for other reasons. Consistent with this, in the Cambridge Study, boys separated because of parental imprisonment had more antisocial problems (Murray and Farrington, 2005) and more mental health problems (Murray and Farrington, 2006) than boys separated from parents for other reasons, even after controlling for other risk factors. However, it is difficult to separate out the effects of separation from other adversities that often follow parental imprisonment (e.g., loss of family income and stigma). Therefore, it is not possible, currently, to state conclusively whether traumatic separation is an important cause of children's problems after parental imprisonment.

If parental imprisonment does harm children because of parent-child separation, policies for children of prisoners should aim to help children cope better with separation. Attachment theory suggests that children cope better when they are given clear and honest explanations about separations, when they have stable care arrangements during separations, and when they have confident expectations of their parent's availability if needed (Kobak, 1999; Poehlmann, 2005). Counseling might also help children cope with the loss during parental imprisonment. School-based therapies given to children experiencing parental divorce show small beneficial effects for children's well-being (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

Four intervention strategies have been proposed that could protect children from harmful effects of separation because of parental imprisonment:

1. *Communication.* Give children's caregivers professional advice about how to provide honest and clear explanations about parental absence to children (Poehlmann, 2005).
2. *Placement.* Children need to be provided with stable care arrangements during parental imprisonment, ideally with families or friends (Bernstein, 2005; Trice and Brewster, 2004).
3. *Contact.* Increase children's opportunities to maintain contact with their imprisoned parent (Bernstein, 2005; Council of Europe, 1997; Trice and Brewster, 2004), in particular through more child-friendly visiting arrangements in prisons.
4. *Therapy.* Offer counseling and therapeutic services for children of

prisoners to help them cope psychologically with the separation (Hames and Pedreira, 2003; Sack et al., 1976).

These interventions have not been rigorously tested, and their effects on children of prisoners are not known. Evidence from Poehlmann's (2005) study emphasizes the need for high-quality evaluations of such policies before they are widely implemented. Poehlmann found that children's feelings of attachment for their imprisoned mothers were *not* significantly associated with what children were told about their mother's imprisonment (see also Sack et al., 1976). Moreover, there was a trend for children who had visited their mothers in prison to have *less* positive feelings about their mothers than children who had not visited prison (see also Petrosino et al., 2003, on negative effects of visiting prisons for other high-risk youths). However, Trice and Brewster (2004) found that more frequent contact between adolescent children and their imprisoned mothers predicted better child outcomes, in terms of school suspension and school dropout rates. Further research is required to establish the effects of child contact with imprisoned parents, and under what conditions it is beneficial for children.

INADEQUATE PARENTING

Children's caregivers often experience considerable distress during parental imprisonment (Murray, 2005), and children often have unstable care arrangements after parental imprisonment (Phillips et al., 2006). Therefore, parental imprisonment might cause children to receive inadequate care and supervision, and this might cause children's behavior difficulties.

In the Cambridge Study, children who experienced parental imprisonment during their first 10 years of life were more likely than children without imprisoned parents to be poorly supervised and to have fathers with cruel, passive, or neglecting attitudes, who used harsh or erratic discipline (Murray and Farrington, 2005). These parenting variables were also independent predictors of boys' delinquent development in the Cambridge Study (Farrington, 2003). In the Great Smoky Mountains Study, parental arrest or incarceration was associated with child abuse (sexual and physical), use of harsh discipline, and over-protective or intrusive parenting (Phillips et al., 2006). Thus, in both the Cambridge Study and the Great Smoky Mountains Study, children of prisoners were exposed to higher-than-average levels of potentially harmful parenting practices. However, neither project established whether parenting risks increased after parental imprisonment, or whether parenting risks were already present before the imprisonment took place. Prospective longitudinal studies with

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repeated assessments are required to investigate whether parental imprisonment causes an increase in inadequate parenting of children, and whether this mediates the effects of parental imprisonment on children's behavior.

If children of prisoners are at risk because of inadequate parenting, parenting programs could be used to reduce parenting risks for children. Eddy and Reid (2002) reviewed four well-tested community-based parenting programs that might be adapted for use with prisoners' families:

1. *Nurse home visiting programs*, designed to support mothers in high-risk circumstances and improve prenatal care and maternal health (Olds and Kitzman, 1993).
2. *Parent management training*, aimed at enhancing parenting skills and parents' handling of child misbehavior (Webster-Stratton, 1989).
3. *Multisystemic therapy*, targeting parent-child interactions as well as wider social problems of youth (Henggeler, 1997).
4. *Multidimensional treatment foster care*, designed to provide therapeutic care for youngsters removed from their homes, and work toward reintegration and support of children with their natural family (Chamberlain and Reid, 1998).

All four of these parenting programs have been shown to reduce children's antisocial behavior in randomized controlled trials in the community. Parenting courses are already widely used in prisons in the United States (Clement, 1993) and in England and Wales (Smith, 2004). Although prison parenting programs rarely include elements of well-tested community-based programs (Eddy and Reid, 2002), a recent systematic review suggests that some prison-based parenting programs might improve parents' attitudes and knowledge about parenting (Dowling and Gardner, 2005). Further research is required to assess whether parenting programs, inside and outside of prison, could reduce long-term adverse outcomes for children of prisoners.

ECONOMIC STRAIN

A third mechanism that might link parental imprisonment with children's adverse outcomes is economic strain, which is consistently associated with antisocial behavior. In the meta-analysis by Lipsey and Derzon (1998), family social class was one of the two strongest family predictors of serious and violent delinquency in young adulthood. In the Cambridge Study, family poverty measured at ages 8–10 was one of the six most important independent predictors of later offending (Farrington, 2003). Both in the Cambridge Study (Murray and Farrington, 2005) and in the Great Smoky Mountains Study (Phillips et al., 2006), children of prisoners

experienced higher rates of economic strain than other children. The association between parental imprisonment and economic strain remained, even after controlling for background parental risks, in the Great Smoky Mountains Study. However, neither study established whether parental imprisonment caused an increase in family poverty over preexisting levels.

Parental imprisonment might cause increased economic strain in the short term because imprisoned parents cannot contribute to family income, and because families often have to pay for prison visits, telephone calls (especially if prisoners call collect, as in the United States), mail, and sending money to imprisoned relatives. In the study by Arditti et al. (2003) of 56 families of prisoners, family poverty significantly increased after imprisonment of a family member, according to retrospective reports. The proportion of families who lived on less than \$5,000 per year increased from 5% before imprisonment to 29% after imprisonment. In the long term, imprisonment may cause unemployment and decreased educational opportunities among ex-prisoners, which may expose children to further economic strain.

Three sets of policies have been proposed that might alleviate economic strain among prisoners' families and reduce adverse outcomes among children of prisoners:

1. *Financial assistance.* Ensure that prisoners' families receive necessary benefits and provide emergency funds to help overcome the immediate financial difficulties caused by loss of income (Council of Europe, 1997).
2. *Reduce costs.* Provide free transport or financial assistance for prison visits. Reduce the costs of telephone calls between prison and home (Bernstein, 2005).
3. *Prisoner employment.* Provide prisoners with paid jobs while in custody and increase work schemes that employ former prisoners (Council of Europe, 1997).

A natural experiment in the Great Smoky Mountains Study showed that income supplements to poor American Indian families reduced levels of children's conduct disorder and oppositional defiant disorder over a four-year period (Costello et al., 2003). However, we are not aware of any high-quality tests of whether policies to relieve economic strain among prisoners' families have the desired effect on children's behavior.

STIGMA AND LABELING

Parental imprisonment might cause children to experience stigma, bullying, and teasing, which might increase children's antisocial behavior and mental health problems (Boswell and Wedge, 2002; Sack, 1977; Sack et al., 1976). According to labeling theory, "the experience of being labeled by

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social control agencies may result in an alteration of personal identity, an exclusion from the normal routines of everyday life, and a greater involvement in delinquent acts” (Paternoster and Iovanni, 1989:363). It is also possible that there is official bias against children of prisoners, making them more likely than their peers to be prosecuted or convicted for their crimes.

There have been no systematic studies of whether social stigma mediates the relationship between parental imprisonment and children’s adverse outcomes. However, some evidence regarding official bias comes from the Cambridge Study. If children of prisoners are more likely to be prosecuted or convicted than their peers because of official bias, there should be stronger effects of parental imprisonment on official measures of offending (convictions) than on self-report measures of offending. However, parental imprisonment had similar effects on convictions and self-reported offending in the Cambridge Study (Murray and Farrington, 2005), suggesting that official bias did not account for criminal outcomes of prisoners’ children.

Social attitudes that stigmatize crime and imprisonment will be hard to change. Given the paucity of evidence about the processes of social stigma experienced by children of prisoners, it is difficult to specify policies that could reduce these effects. However, three sets of policies might be considered for this purpose:

1. *Anonymity of offenders.* Prohibit the public identification of offenders, not only before conviction, but also after it (Walker, 1980).
2. *Restorative justice.* Divert offenders away from courts to restorative justice conferences, which emphasize reconciliation among offenders, victims, family members, friends, and the community (Braithwaite and Mugford, 1994; Sherman, 2003).
3. *Strengths-based sentencing.* Increase the use of community services that emphasize the positive contributions that ex-offenders can make to the community (Maruna and LeBel, 2002).

CONCLUSION

Phillips et al. (2006) argue that, to prevent crime and incarceration among children of prisoners, parenting programs are of limited importance. They suggest that parental substance abuse and mental health problems should be addressed using wider criminal justice reforms. We agree that children of prisoners are at risk for multiple reasons, and that parenting interventions are likely to be only partially effective in reducing adverse outcomes for children of prisoners. However, parenting styles are

important predictors of delinquent development, and parenting interventions have been shown to be effective. The potential utility of parenting interventions for preventing adverse outcomes among children of prisoners should not be minimized. Parental imprisonment might also cause adverse outcomes for children because of traumatic experiences of separation, economic strain, social stigma, and other social adversities. Research is needed to evaluate programs intended to mitigate these effects.

We have suggested 14 types of policy interventions that might reduce the harmful effects of parental imprisonment on children, depending on which mechanisms cause children of prisoners to be at risk. Most likely, a combination of policies will be required to tackle the multiple disadvantages associated with parental imprisonment. To draw confident conclusions about the best programs for children of prisoners, the following evidence should be collected:

1. More prospective longitudinal data on the risks during and after parental imprisonment for children in different social contexts.
2. Data on the causal effects of parental imprisonment on children. In experiments, convicted parents could be randomly assigned either to prison (the usual treatment) or to some alternative treatment (see, e.g., Killias et al., 2000). In quasi-experiments, children could be prospectively studied from before parental imprisonment until afterward, using matched control groups on statistical controls.
3. Evidence on how the effects of parental imprisonment differ according to whether mothers or fathers are imprisoned.
4. More evidence on the mechanisms linking parental imprisonment and children's outcomes.
5. Evidence on protective factors that apply to children of prisoners.
6. Experimental evidence on the effects of different intervention programs on children of prisoners.

It is especially important to study both concurrent and future effects of parental imprisonment on children. Children should be tracked before and after parental imprisonment in prospective longitudinal studies, collecting official and self-report data on parents and children. The children of prisoners need the best scientific evidence on the effectiveness of programs that might mitigate the harmful effects of parental imprisonment. We encourage criminologists and funding agencies to collect this evidence.

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Joseph Murray is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, where he received his M.Phil. and Ph.D. in criminology. He is currently working on the Zurich Project on the Social Development of Children and the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development. He has published eight psychology and criminology papers, and he won the Manuel Lopez-Rey Graduate Prize in criminology in 2002.

David P. Farrington is Professor of Psychological Criminology at Cambridge University. He is co-chair of the Campbell Collaboration Crime and Justice Group, which aims to complete systematic reviews of the literature on the effectiveness of criminological interventions. He is also Director of the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, which is a prospective longitudinal survey of 400 London men from age 8 to age 48. He has published 50 books, monographs, and government publications, and over 400 articles on criminological and psychological topics. He has received the Sellin-Glueck and Sutherland Awards of the American Society of Criminology.

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