

This article is based on the following Campbell review:

Murray J, Farrington D, Sekol I, Olsen R: *Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Child Antisocial Behaviour and Mental Health: A Systematic Review*. Campbell Collaboration, 2009



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## PARENTAL IMPRISONMENT PREDICTS BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS FOR CHILDREN

Children are the hidden victims when parents break the law and end up in prison. According to a new Campbell review, the imprisonment of parents might contribute to children suffering psychological and social harm. Children who have had a parent in prison have twice the risk of developing behavioural problems and poor psychological health than children who have not had a parent in prison.

### THE HIDDEN VICTIMS

An increasing number of people around the world are serving prison sentences. Many of these people are parents to children under the age of 18. The number of children requiring support and attention due to parental imprisonment is therefore also increasing.

Distressful events during childhood can have long-term consequences, as children may carry these negative experiences with them in adulthood. For a number of years, there has been considerable interest in the effects on children of, for example, parental divorce, parental illness, or death of a parent. Yet children with a parent in prison have been and still are a neglected group. These children require support and care in order to best survive the often unpleasant and difficult experience of being separated from someone they are close to.

### CHILDREN MIGHT BE HARMED

The systematic review, which covers the best research in the field, concludes that children with a parent serving a prison sentence are at considerable risk. Specifically, children who have had a parent in prison have twice the risk of developing behavioural and psychological problems compared with children who have not had to endure the same experience.

In other words, the researchers found an association between the child problem behaviour and whether or not the child had experienced having a parent in prison. However, on the basis of these studies the

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researchers are unable to determine whether or not parental imprisonment causes these problems or whether they are actually caused by other experiences. For example, many children of prisoners may have difficult family and living situations before their parent is imprisoned. These difficulties could be the cause of their behaviour problems rather than the experience of parental imprisonment. The researchers highlight that these children require extra support and attention. While separation from the imprisoned parent in itself may not necessarily lead to changes in the child's behaviour, the review indicates that it might be a contributing factor.

On the basis of the review results, the researchers suggest that practitioners should be aware of possible consequences of having an imprisoned parent, when children display maladjusted behaviour or signs of psychological distress.

#### IMPACT ON THE CHILD

There are a number of different theories about how parental imprisonment might affect children. The experience might, for example, disrupt the child's ability to bond with others. Living conditions of families can deteriorate due to the loss of income and other negative experiences after parental imprisonment, so much so that the child may be drawn to crime. There might also be an increased risk of the child committing criminal offences because the imprisoned parent is unable to provide supervision and care for the child. At the same time, there could be a risk of the child being labelled as maladjusted, which is associated with a greater risk of being accused of crime. Several of these processes might affect children's psychological health as well as their criminal behaviour. Therefore, according to existing theories, it is possible for children of prisoners to suffer harm both socially and psychologically. The theories also indicate that the impact of parental imprisonment on children would be strongest when children were living with their parent before the imprisonment.

Various solutions might help children avoid suffering negative consequences of having a parent in prison. The most natural solution would be reducing the number of parents in prison. This could be brought about by using alternatives to prison sentences, for example, house arrest, fines, electronic surveillance or intensive supervision. Such measures would have less impact on the everyday life of the child, as the punishment of the parent would not involve separation.

#### FACTS ABOUT THE REVIEW

The researchers reached their conclusion by comparing 16 studies investigating the impact on children of having parents in prison. In nine of these studies, parental imprisonment occurs during the child's childhood (0-18 years), while in seven of the studies it is unclear whether the parent's prison sentence occurred before or after the

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birth of the child. The studies are from the US, England, Australia, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands.

As mentioned earlier, the studies identify imprisonment as a risk factor, but not necessarily a causal risk factor. The researchers therefore recommend new studies seeking to draw specific conclusions about the causal effects of imprisonment on the behaviour of children.

The researchers behind the systematic review also encourage future research to focus on why some children of prisoners develop problematic behaviour while others do not.

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