

The Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children's Mental Health



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Abstract

As the rate of incarceration continues to rise in the United States, millions of families are left to adapt and face the circumstances of another's actions. As a result, children who experience living without a parent, are at risk for developing long-lasting psychopathological implications. The present study aimed to examine how parental imprisonment (PI) affected children's mental health, specifically, how it affected their anxiety levels and self-regulation skills. The current study is a secondary analysis of the data from the Pathways to Desistance study which included a sample of 1,354 serious juvenile offenders in Maricopa County and Philadelphia County. The present study utilized baseline data to investigate the effects PI has on children's mental health. The study utilized data acquired from the Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale (RCMAS) and the Children's Emotion and Arousal Regulation: How I Feel scale. PI was considered if parents had been in jail or prison for any period of time. The present study's findings suggested parental incarceration negatively impacted children's abilities to regulate their emotions and behaviors. Results indicated children with one or more incarcerated parent demonstrated higher levels of anxiety. This research helps identify possible interventions related to social support and psychotherapy that may promote resiliency and foster children's physical and mental well-being in the face of experiencing PI.

Introduction

Significance of the Study:

- Approximately 5 million children in the United States are affected by PI (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).
- There are multiple possibilities as to how children react and are affected by their parent(s) being arrested or imprisoned which calls for further research and exploration on the issue.

Purpose of Research:

- To investigate the relationship between PI and children's mental health.

Research Question:

1. How does parental involvement in the criminal justice system (parental imprisonment) affect children's mental health? – Mental health in terms of anxiety & self-regulation.

Hypothesis:

- Compared to children without PI, those who have experienced PI will have higher anxiety and lower self-regulation ability.



Literature Review

Anxiety:

- Within Kautz's (2018) study, child participants reported experiencing variation of anxious feelings.
- Dallaire and Wilson's (2009) study: Children of imprisoned parents exhibited worse anxious symptoms in regard to school performance than their counterparts.

Self-regulation:

- Zeman et al.'s (2017) study's results concluded children who were exposed to PI demonstrated poor anger regulation and are more likely to demonstrate negative externalizing behaviors.
- Dallaire and Wilson (2009) found children were more likely to demonstrate maladjustment in regard to their emotional regulation skills after witnessing their parent's criminal activity and imprisonment.

Gaps in the Literature:

- Few research has been conducted on specific mental health related issues and the effects as a result of PI.
- Minimal research discusses the onset or extent of impairment in relation to mental health among children with incarcerated parents.

Methodology

Research Design and Data Collection Procedures:

- A secondary analysis of the data from the Pathways to Desistance Study carried out from 2000 to 2010 in Arizona and Pennsylvania.
- Data was collected through computer-assisted interviews.
- Data was collected during multiple after baseline interview.

Sample and Sampling Method:

- Participants - youth aged 14 to 19 who were enlisted via juvenile and adult facilities.
- Male and female participants.
- The sample included 1,170 males and 184 females.
- Participants were found guilty of committing a serious crime.
- Sample size of current study is (n=1354) juvenile offenders.

Measures:

- Independent variable is parental imprisonment. PI was calculated by participants answering if their parents have ever been arrested and if parent went to jail or prison (0 = no, 1 = yes).
- One dependent variable was anxiety levels. The RCMAS is a self-report measure to evaluate the total anxiety scores. Higher scores indicated greater levels of anxiety.
- The other dependent variable was self-regulation. The Children's Emotion and Arousal Regulation: How I Feel scale (Walden et al., 1995) asked participants to respond on a 4-point Likert scale to questions. A higher score on the scale indicated a better ability to regulate emotions.

Results

2 Mann Whitney U Tests:

- The first Mann-Whitney U test was used to examine the difference in self-regulation scores of participants who had one or more parent in prison or in jail and those who did not.
- Significant difference in self-regulation scores - participants with no PI had higher scores on the self-regulation scale (Mean Rank = 692.74) compared to participants that did not (Mean Rank = 638.56).
- The second Mann-Whitney U test was used to examine the difference in anxiety scores of participants.
- There was a significant difference in total anxiety scores between participants with PI and those who did not (U = 236914.5, p = .001).
- Participants who did have one or more parents in jail or prison had higher total anxiety scores (Mean Rank = 718.42) compared to participants that did not (Mean Rank = 643.22).

Descriptive Statistics Table

Variables	n	%
Independent Variable		
Parent incarcerated/jailed (n = 1,343)		
Yes	514	38.3
No	829	61.7
Dependent Variables		
Self-Regulation	M = 2.76	SD = 0.66
Anxiety	M = 10.12	SD = 6.11

Discussion

Summary of Findings:

- Findings support that children with one or more parent incarcerated/imprisoned demonstrated negative mental health implications such as poorer self-regulation skills and higher anxiety compared to children with no parental history of imprisonment.
- After conducting inferential analyses to test the relationship between each independent and dependent variable, 2 major findings were evident.
 1. Children with one or more imprisoned parent had higher levels of anxiety than children without incarcerated parents.
 2. Children who did not have one or more incarcerated parent yielded higher scores on self-regulation scales compared to children who did have at least one parent in jail or prison.

Figure 1

Simple Bar Mean of Self-Regulation Scores

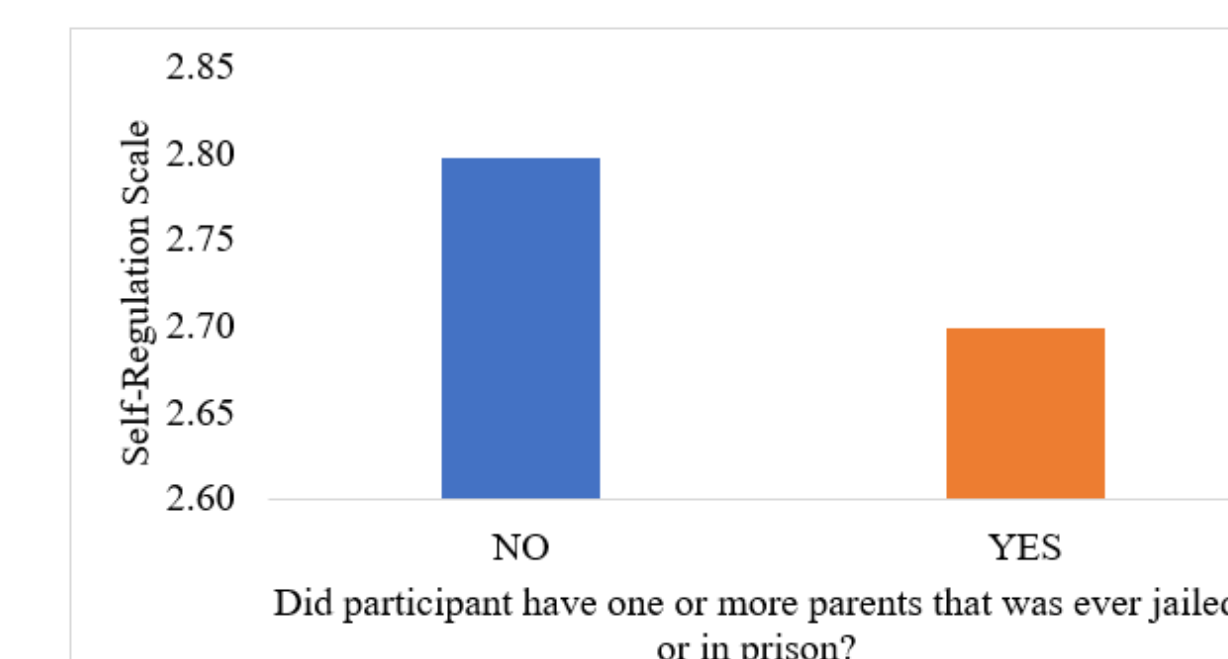
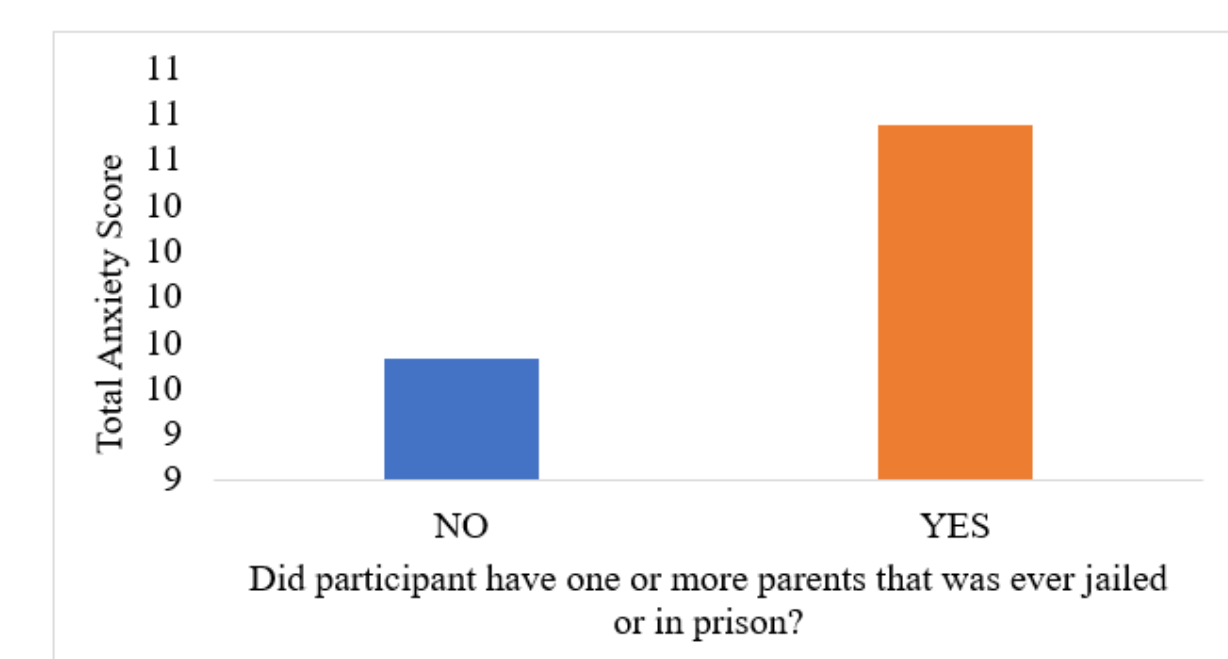


Figure 2

Simple Bar Mean of Total Anxiety Scores



Implications for Research and Practice:

- Additional research on the effects of PI on a wider range of children is necessary.
- Findings highlight the importance of conducting a thorough assessment of children of all ages and their families in addition to screening for adverse childhood experiences.
- Social workers who practice in areas where high rates of crime and imprisonment occur should consider screening and assessing children more carefully.

Strengths and Limitations:

Strengths –

- Participants and data were gathered from multiple geographic areas.
- Utilizing 2 standardized measures provided a valid and reliable method to yield results.
- Thorough job of acquiring detailed data from participants such as family structure, parent education levels, and details regarding PI.

Limitations –

- The current study consisted of more male than female participants.
- Because the Pathways to Desistance study enrolled juvenile offenders as participants, findings cannot be generalized to all youth.
- Children under the age of 14 ineligible to be a part of the study. This restricted access to further data thus overlooking how younger children's mental health may have been affected by PI.