

Imprisoned primary carer fathers and their children: An international perspective

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Currently, millions of children worldwide are being impacted by parental imprisonment. In 2008, it was estimated that in the United States (US) alone there were 1.7 million minor children effected (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Numbers indicate that an estimated one in four African American young people have experienced the imprisonment of their father as a child (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014). It is also well established that the vast majority of people in prison are men (e.g. see Glaze & Kaeble, 2014; ABS, 2016) and around 50% of these men are parents (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Despite this, it is only in recent times that there has been much attention paid to the parenting status of these men. As such, there remains a gap in research, theory and practice with regard to primary carer fathers in prison.

It is due to this gap in knowledge and practice that fatherhood and imprisonment is such an interesting field of study. My PhD research into this topic focuses on the experiences of imprisoned primary carer fathers in Victoria, Australia. I aim to provide new insights into imprisoned fathers' experiences of arrest, imprisonment and release. Receiving the Sylff Research Abroad allowed me to speak with experts in research and program design in the US to provide an international context to my dissertation. My research explores primary carer fathers in prison through a lens of masculinity and identity and argues that fathers, as carers, continue to be overlooked throughout the criminal justice process.

“Intergenerational Offending”

One of the themes that arose when speaking with researchers in the US was the – often well-intentioned – tendency when reporting on COIP to highlight statistics that may be unfounded or misleading. For example, the intergenerational cycle of offending is touted as being a main priority and one commonly cited statistic is that COIP are seven times more likely than other children to end up in prison. However, as was noted by a number of

academics and international experts in this field this tendency to focus on intergenerational offending needs to be treated with caution (Raimon, Lee & Genty, 2009). Statistics such as this, that simply state the likelihood that a COIP will end up in prison, fail to take into account why this might be happening in the first place. They also do little to acknowledge the considerable number of COIP who do not go on to offend.

If we think critically about why COIP, and Children of Incarcerated Fathers (COIF), might go on to offend at a higher rate, factors such as racial and ethnic bias in the system must be taken into account. Currently in the US one in nine African American children have an incarcerated parent (NRCCFI, 2014). Furthermore, African American people are incarcerated at a rate more than five times the rate of white Americans (The Sentencing Project, 2016). Similarly, in Australia, the historical treatment of Indigenous Australians in the criminal justice system, and in society at large, has contributed to the ongoing over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners where they account for over a quarter of the Australian prison population and make up only two percent of the Australian population (ABS, 2017). More research is needed regarding African American and Indigenous COIP to determine the long term impact of imprisonment on children.

Parental Arrest

If statistics highlighting the impact of imprisonment on children are not treated with caution we also run the risk of over-estimating the causal effect of a father's imprisonment on their children, as there may be a range of other factors, such as sentencing, foster care, or arrest, that have impacted COIF. This is particularly true for those children who are present at the time of arrest as this is a time of uncertainty for children and can have ongoing consequences (Nieto, 2002). Children exposed to an arrest may experience a range of behaviours such as loss of sleep, separation anxiety, hyper-vigilance, irritability, withdrawal (The Yale Child Study Center, 2011) and "elevated PTS[D] symptoms" (Phillips & Zhou, 2010, p. 1253).

However, research relating to arrest often involves the impact of multiple/traumatic events on children, such as imprisonment and arrest, and so may not differentiate between multiple events on children. As a result, the impact of such an event may be over- or underestimated. Furthermore, some studies include specific samples of children, like those who

are in foster care (Phillips & Zhou, 2010), who have witnessed an arrest. It is unclear whether the same results apply to those children who are *not* in foster care. Overall then, while it is clear children who witness an event, such as an arrest, may be seriously impacted, questions relating to the validity of statistics remain and as such more research is needed.

Conversely, innovative formal responses to children are advancing on an international level. After being invited to attend the Bay Area Summit on Children of Incarcerated Parents in Oakland I attended a workshop discussing model policies for children at the point of arrest. As there are currently only limited guidelines available to police when arresting parents in Victoria, Australia, this was a great way to hear from police professionals and experts in this area. In the US, there are several child sensitive arrest procedures and policies that, if adopted in Australia, would prove beneficial in reducing the impact on children whose parents are arrested. The IACP recently developed a Model Policy to Care for Children Impacted by Parental Arrest. This policy statement notes that police officers will be trained to respond to children with an aim in minimizing trauma and promoting child-safety following an arrest (IACP, 2014). As well as this, it includes training, technical assistance and numerous resources for law enforcement (2016). A recent report by Strategies for Youth and the US Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs Diagnostic Center also provides model policies, checklists, and guidelines for anticipating children's experiences of arrest whilst offering child sensitive responses (ACCIPP, 2017). Lastly, the Urban Institute, in collaboration with the National Institute of Corrections have guidelines for local police departments looking to develop and initiate parental arrest policies that are child sensitive. These were released in the "Toolkit for Developing Parental Arrest Policies" which acknowledges the challenges in changing police culture, how to account for the unpredictability of arrest, and identifying suitable caregivers for children at the point of arrest (ACCIPP, 2017). Overall, these advancements in parental arrest procedures and protocols show a commitment to child sensitive practice and reducing trauma for children. Australian jurisdictions must turn to these model policies to immediately begin minimising the effect on children whose parents, and fathers, are arrested.

Fathering from prison

The lack of attention paid to COIP and incarcerated fathers was initially what sparked my interest in this topic while working as a Research Assistant on a project exploring care planning for children when their primary carer parent is imprisoned (Trotter et al., 2015). During this role one statistic stood out to me: Around three-quarters of the primary carer fathers I interviewed had never received, nor been offered, any parenting support services or programs in prison. The opposite was true for women. When you add to this to the paucity of in-depth evaluations and longitudinal studies relating to fathering programs in prison it signifies a fundamental difference in how fathers are viewed in society, and in the prison system: fathers – and indeed their children – are simply forgotten.

So as not to be continually forgotten, the focus needs to shift towards what works in maintaining connections between imprisoned fathers and their children. When discussing this with NGOs and researchers it became clear that there is a benefit in providing fathering programs that are fully immersive in nature. This can be seen in the development of fathering units or pods that are intensive, offer a range of skills based learning, are creative, provide education and have a hands-on approach to fathering. Examples of units such as this were developed in Holland with the addition of a Fathering Wing as part of the Prison Project (n.d.) and in Wales where a Family Interventions Unit proved successful in connecting fathers and their children as part of Invisible Walls Wales (Clancy & Maguire, 2017). Fathering programs such as this allow fathers to engage with their children and work towards ongoing connection upon release. This may be the best way forward for prison management in Australia if children and families are indeed a main priority.

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