Risk and Resilience in Young Children of Incarcerated Mothers

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Despite the increase in the number of young children with incarcerated mothers that has occurred in the U.S. during the past decades, there are relatively few published developmental studies focusing on this population.

Young children (less than 10 years old) comprise the largest percentage of affected children.
The study described here investigated family characteristics and key areas associated with developmental competence in 60 children between the ages of 2 and 7 years during their mothers’ incarceration:

- attachment relationships
- intellectual outcomes
- behavior problems
- caregiving quality
Children of Incarcerated Mothers Study

- 96 mothers and 60 families participated (31 boys, 29 girls)
- Multiple methods were used to collect data
  - interview with the mother in prison
  - home visit
  - caregiver interview and observations
  - child assessments (standardized, videotaped interviews)
- Inclusion criteria:
  - Mother incarcerated for at least 2 months
  - Mother retained legal rights to the child
  - Child was placed with kin
  - Child was between 2.5-7.5 years
  - Family lived in Wisconsin
Context of Multiple Risks for Children

Children

Most children experienced one or more risks that threatened their core developmental competencies

- 48% were prenatally exposed to substances
- 35% had both parents incarcerated
- 40% had changed caregivers 2 or more times
- 20% had witnessed the mother’s arrest

Caregivers

- 60% of caregivers were grandparents
- 40% of caregivers had fair to poor health
- 40% of caregivers had elevated depression
- Most lived in poverty

Nature of Mothers’ Offenses

Drugs
Property
Forgery
Violent
Children’s Developmental Outcomes

1. High frequency of negative attachment relationships
   - Measured with Attachment Story Completion Task (Bretherton et al.)
   - Assessed representations of relationships with caregiver and with mother

2. Elevated rates of cognitive delays
   - Measured with Stanford-Binet Scales of Intelligence, 4th edition (Thorndike et al.)
   - Assessed verbal and nonverbal intellectual skills

3. Elevated rates of behavior problems
   - Measured with the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock)
   - Total Problems, Internalizing, Externalizing
Caregiver Measures

- Quality of the home and family environment
  - HOME, 2nd edition (Caldwell & Bradley)
  - FES (Moos & Moos)
- Sociodemographic risks
  - Multiple risk index (Sameroff et al.)
- Caregiver well-being
  - Perceived health
  - CES-D (Radloff)
- Caregiver social support
  - SSQ (Crnic et al.)
- Perceived relationship with mother and child
  - IFF (Lowman)
Maternal Measures

- Sociodemographic risks
  - Multiple risk index (Sameroff et al.)
- Maternal well-being
  - Interview with mother (Gilfus; Garcia-Coll)
  - CES-D (Radloff)
- Perceived relationship with caregiver and child
  - IFF (Lowman)
- Incarceration related variables
  - Interview with mother
Children’s Attachment Relationships

- Attachment Story Completion Task
  - (Bretherton et al., 1990; subset of MSSB)
- 4 story stems with attachment related content
  - Spilled juice, hurt knee, monster, separation/reunion
- Content and structure coded
  - 9 codes (3 negative content, 3 positive content, 3 structure)
    - Kappas ranged from .64-.86
  - Cluster analysis on 9 codes
Features of representations of secure relationships

- **Content**
  - Adults portrayed as nurturing and responsive
  - Lack of violent, traumatic or chaotic content
  - Self portrayed as competent
  - Adults portrayed as authority figures

- **Structure**
  - Organization and clarity in descriptions
  - Story is resolved and coherent
  - Willingness to talk about or enact sequences about relationships
Three Clusters of Attachment

Children’s Representations of Relationships

- Most children had representations of negative relationships with caregivers and mothers.
- However, about 28% of children could be considered resilient because they had:
  - a representation of a positive relationship with the mother and
  - a representation of a positive relationship with the caregiver.

Children with Secure Relationships

- Lived with one caregiver since mother’s incarceration (had not moved among caregivers)
- Experienced sadness but not anger at time of separation from mother
- Were older
  - (trend) Were told about the mother’s incarceration in an honest, simple, developmentally appropriate manner
  - (trend) had not visited mother at prison in past 2 months

What Children were Told about Their Mother’s Incarceration

Elevated caregiver SES risks were associated with below average cognitive outcomes.

Caregiver SES risks were more important than maternal SES risks or biological risks.

Caregiver HOME scores and Children’s IQ Scores

Caregiver Report of Children’s Behavior Problems

- Elevated rates of problem behaviors
  - Total problem behaviors
    - 18% in clinical range (9% normative)
    - 22% in borderline or clinical range (16% normative)
  - Internalizing or Externalizing
    - 8% clinical range (9% normative)
    - 17% in borderline or clinical range (16% normative)
- More behavior problems related to elevated caregiver depressive symptoms
Children’s Behavior Problems by Gender

- Girls were more likely to show overall and borderline behavior problems
- Boys were more likely to show clinically significant externalizing behaviors

- Total problem behaviors
  - 16% boys clinical range
    - (16% borderline or clinical range)
  - 21% girls clinical range
    - (29% borderline or clinical)

- Internalizing
  - 10% boys clinical range
  - 14% girls clinical range

- Externalizing
  - 13% boys clinical range
  - 4% girls clinical range
Resilience was more likely when children’s caregivers:

- were stable (cared for child continuously without moving child to different households)
- had economic resources
- were not depressed
- were able to provide high quality home environments
- had open communication about the incarceration in the family
Unanswered questions

- How does children’s relationship quality change over time during a parent’s incarceration?
- How do these children fare if and when reunification occurs? (especially if they have been living in a stable caregiving situation and are doing well)
- Are there differential outcomes for siblings? Why?
- Do the “resilient” young children continue to function well as they grow older? What systems need to be changed to promote continuing resilience?
- Need for high quality longitudinal investigations that focus on the cognitive, behavioral, and social emotional development of young children of incarcerated parents.
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