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Danielle H. Dallaire *Editors*

Children with Incarcerated Mothers Separation, Loss, and Reunification



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Children with Incarcerated Mothers

Separation, Loss, and Reunification

 Springer

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Abstract This Brief focuses on mothers in the U.S. criminal justice system and their children. After decades of mass incarceration, the United States now incarcerates more women than any other country in the world, and the vast majority of incarcerated women are mothers of minor children. The growing involvement of mothers in all forms of the criminal justice system, including arrest, incarceration, reentry, and community supervision, requires a better understanding of how such involvement impacts children and families. This Brief presents six new empirical studies, most of them longitudinal, designed to address gaps in our knowledge base about maternal criminal justice involvement and maternal and child well-being. We apply an intergenerational lifespan developmental perspective and discuss the attachment-related themes of separation, loss, and reunion in the introductory chapter and throughout the volume. In addition, issues related to prevention and intervention, gender-responsive programs, and themes of trauma, addiction, child welfare involvement, low resource environments, and resilience are integrated throughout and highlighted in the concluding chapter. The Brief closes by presenting policy and practice implications of the research for mothers involved in the criminal justice system and their children and families.

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Introduction to Incarcerated Mothers and Their Children: Separation, Loss, and Reunification



Danielle H. Dallaire and Julie Poehlmann-Tynan

Rates of incarceration steeply increased in the United States between 1990 and the early 2000s, and after peaking in 2008, rates have started to decline for men (Kaeble & Cowhig, 2018). In contrast, the rate of incarceration among women continues to rise (Kajstura, 2019). For example, from 2016 to 2017, even though the rate of jail incarceration declined overall, the number of women incarcerated in jail on any given day rose by more than 5% (Kajstura, 2019). In 2018, women made up 7.6% of the overall state and federal prison population with 110,845 incarcerated women (Carson, 2020). The rate of incarceration among women decreased 0.5% from 2017 to 2018; in contrast, the rate of male incarceration decreased 1.7% during that same time period (Carson, 2020).

As incarceration rates have skyrocketed over the previous decades, so too has the amount of scholarship devoted to the issue of parental incarceration and its consequences for children and families (see Eddy & Poehlmann-Tynan, 2019; Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012). Though much has been learned about the intergenerational implications of parental incarceration for children, families, and communities, much is left unknown. Significant gaps remain in our knowledge about how children and families cope with parent-child separation during parental incarceration, particularly for mothers (for a review of paternal incarceration and child development, see Dyer, Pleck, & McBride, 2012, or Turney & Haskins, 2019). Research findings regarding intergenerational implications of maternal criminal justice

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involvement have been mixed, and there are many shortcomings such as a lack of attention to other forms of correctional supervision besides incarceration, limited data on reunification, and limited data on relevant child outcomes (e.g., Poehlmann-Tynan, 2020). The collection of studies contained in this Brief extends previous work in this area and addresses important gaps in our knowledge.

The overarching theme addressed in this volume is maternal-child separation, loss, and reunion associated with maternal incarceration and material criminal justice involvement. This theme is examined in the collection of articles in the context of short- and long-term maternal and child outcomes, prevention and intervention programming, and recidivism and community corrections. This introductory chapter will begin by briefly reviewing what is known about mother-child separation during incarceration, including statistics about maternal incarceration and other forms of criminal justice involvement in the United States and the presentation of key terms and concepts. We then highlight theoretical models that can help guide research, intervention, and policy in this area, providing a framework and set of themes that unify the set of empirical studies. Next, we point out several gaps in the literature in relation to opportunities for future research that can inform policy and practice, such as using life span and developmental and intergenerational approaches for research and application, and including additional data on children. Finally, we introduce the new empirical work that is presented in the following chapters.

Maternal Incarceration and Other Forms of Criminal Justice Involvement in the United States

In the United States, criminal justice involvement can take many forms. For example, women are arrested and incarcerated in federal or state prisons or local jails, or they are supervised in the community through probation, parole, residential treatment, or specialized court programs. Over half of women incarcerated in jail are awaiting a hearing, trial, or sentencing, and they lack the funds to pay bail (Kajstura, 2019). In addition, more than 80% of women supervised by the criminal justice system in the United States can be found in the community, not in prisons or jails (Kaeble & Cowhig, 2018). Probation is a mandated period of community supervision used instead of jail incarceration or after a short jail stay, whereas parole is supervised release from prison. The average length of both in the United States is approximately 2 years (Herberman & Bonczar, 2014). Specialized court programs, such as drug courts, also supervise women in the community. The goal of these courts is to manage the underlying causes of criminal legal contact, such as substance dependence or untreated mental illness (Gibbs, Lytle, & Wakefield, 2019). Although a growing body of research and intervention work focuses on children's adjustment to enforced mother-child separation because of maternal incarceration, little attention has been paid to mothers' and children's experiences of maternal community supervision or children's reunion with their mothers. This is particularly