



Chapter 17

The effects of imprisonment on families and children of prisoners

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Family is affected and involved in the prison sentence. It affects everybody close.

(Anonymous prisoner)

Researchers have only begun to explore the far-reaching effects of imprisonment beyond prison walls. Unintended consequences highlighted so far include: the social disorganisation of communities (Clear *et al* 2001); reduced job opportunities for ex-prisoners (Holzer *et al* 2004); diversion of funds away from schools and universities (Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999); and psychological and financial burdens on families.

Families are an important influence on many aspects of prisoners' lives. Family and parenting variables are key predictors of criminal behaviour through the life-course (Farrington 2002; Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber 1986). Loss of outside relationships is considered the most painful aspect of confinement for prisoners (Flanagan 1980; Richards 1978). Family contact is associated with lower rates of self-harm while inside prison (Harvey, this volume; Liebling 1992). Families are one of the most important factors affecting prisoners' rehabilitation after release (Social Exclusion Unit 2002).

Unfortunately, prisoners' families have been little studied in their own right. The effects of imprisonment on families and children of prisoners are almost entirely neglected in academic research, prison statistics, public policy and media coverage. However, we can infer from prisoners' backgrounds that their families are a highly vulnerable group. Limited research to date suggests that imprisonment can have devastating consequences for partners and children. As such, issues of legitimacy



and fairness may be as important outside prison as they are inside (see Liebling, this volume). As Roger Shaw pointed out almost 20 years ago, if we do not attend to the effects of imprisonment on children, we face the possibility of punishing innocent victims, neglecting a seriously at-risk group, and possibly causing crime in the next generation (Shaw 1987).

This chapter reviews research on the effects of imprisonment on prisoners' partners as a context for a more detailed discussion of the effects on prisoners' children. Evidence on these topics comes almost entirely from cross-sectional studies using convenience samples, and without standardised measures, triangulation of sources or suitable controls. Therefore, only cautious hypotheses can be proposed about the specific effects of imprisonment on families and children. A general model is proposed of hypothesised influences on child adjustment during parental imprisonment. Explanatory factors are distinguished by whether they appear to have selection effects, or direct, mediating or moderating effects. To test the hypothesised effects identified in this chapter, we need large-scale, longitudinal studies of prisoners' children, with reliable measures and appropriate controls. Disentangling factors that influence prisoners' children's outcomes is crucial to improving our understanding of prison effects, and to implementing effective social policies to support this vulnerable population.

Hidden victims

There are no accurate, up-to-date estimates of the numbers of imprisoned parents, or children of imprisoned parents, in the UK. The last National Prison Survey in England and Wales reported that 47 per cent of female prisoners and 32 per cent of male prisoners had children living with them before coming to prison (Dodd and Hunter 1992). However, information was not collected on parenthood specifically in this survey. By contrast, in the US, inmate surveys have been conducted every five years since 1974, compiling detailed information on prisoners' children (Johnson and Waldfoegel 2004). Mumola found that there were 1.5 million children with a currently imprisoned parent in the US in 1999; over half a million more than in 1991 (Mumola 2000). Ninety-two per cent had a father in prison. Parental imprisonment disproportionately affected black children (7.0 per cent) and Hispanic children (2.6 per cent), compared to white children (0.8 per cent). The extent to which children experience parental imprisonment may be hidden because we know less about the incidence of parental imprisonment than we do about its prevalence. Although the

UK Treasury stated that 150,000 children currently experience parental imprisonment every year (HM Treasury 2003), it is not clear what evidence this is based on. The last well-known surveys of the incidence of parental imprisonment in England and Wales were conducted in 1984 for fathers (Shaw 1987) and in 1967 for mothers (Gibbs 1971). Despite calls from lobby groups, no one regularly monitors the parental status of prisoners in the UK; there may be literally millions of unidentified children experiencing parental imprisonment.

The effects of imprisonment on partners of prisoners

... It is like someone had died.

(Anonymous wife of prisoner, quoted in Morris 1965: 166)

Imprisonment of a partner can be emotionally devastating and practically debilitating. Loss of income, social isolation, difficulties of maintaining contact, deterioration in relationships, and extra burdens of childcare can compound a sense of loss and hopelessness for prisoners' partners. Unfortunately, prisoners' families have been studied almost entirely with reference to male prisoners' partners and wives. Limited research suggests that the impact on prisoners' spouses is generally more severe than on parents (Ferraro *et al* and Bolton 1983) although parents and other family members can also suffer practical and psychological difficulties (McDermott and King 1992; Noble 1995).

By far the most comprehensive study of prisoners' wives was conducted by Pauline Morris, who interviewed 825 imprisoned men in England and 469 of their wives (Morris 1965). Morris found that imprisonment of a husband was generally experienced as a crisis of family dismemberment rather than a crisis of demoralisation through stigma or shame. Stigma was experienced almost exclusively by wives whose husbands were imprisoned for the first time, and then only at the initial stages of the separation. Among the most common problems reported, 63 per cent of wives said they experienced deterioration in their financial situation; 81 per cent some deterioration in their work; 46 per cent deterioration in present attitude to marriage and future plans; 63 per cent deterioration in social activity; 60 per cent deterioration in relationships with in-laws; and 57 per cent deterioration in relationships with friends and neighbours.²

Since Morris's early work, other studies of prisoners' partners and wives have found remarkably similar themes across the UK, the US, Ireland and Australia. Studies consistently report that loss of income

is one of the most important difficulties faced by partners of male prisoners (Anderson 1966; Ferraro *et al* 1983; McEvoy *et al* 1999; Noble 1995; Richards *et al* 1994; Schneller 1976). Sharp and Marcus-Mendoza (2001) found that imprisoning mothers also caused a drastic reduction in family income. Loss of income is compounded by additional expenses of prison visits, mail, telephone calls (especially if prisoners call collect, as in the US) and sending money to imprisoned relatives. As one family member put it, 'it becomes so expensive, and the cost becomes so enormous that it takes away other things that you could be doing with your money ... I have to look out for my well-being and my children's well-being, because I'm the only source of income they have' (Braman and Wood 2003: 164).

Imprisonment of a partner can also cause home moves (Noble 1995), divorce and relationship problems (Anderson 1966; Ferraro *et al* 1983; McEvoy *et al* 1999) and medical and health problems (Ferraro *et al* 1983; McEvoy *et al* 1999; Noble 1995). Partners with children face single parenthood at a particularly vulnerable time (Peart and Asquith 1992). As well as having to deal with their own problems, partners are expected to support prisoners and to look after children, who are likely to be particularly hard to manage if their parent has been imprisoned (see next section).

Partners face other difficulties that are more intrinsic to the facts of imprisonment (see Irwin and Owen, this volume). Prisoners' partners can suffer because of a lack of information about the imprisonment, visiting, and contact procedures (Ferraro *et al* 1983). Maintaining contact can be fraught with difficulties such as busy booking lines, inconvenient visiting hours, a lack of transport, and the cost and distance of travel (Hounslow *et al* 1982). Exacerbating these problems, prisons are clearly not family-friendly places to visit. Poor visiting facilities and hostile attitudes of staff can put families off visiting, especially those with children (Peart and Asquith 1992).

Although prisoners' families often experience similar stresses, there is growing appreciation that families and partners of prisoners are not a homogenous group. Even within cultural and penal contexts, prison effects on family members are likely to differ according to prior relationships, offence types, social support systems and other socio-demographic factors. Light (1994) found that black prisoners' families endure additional harassment in the English penal system. Richards and colleagues found that families of foreign nationals in British prisons face particular difficulties (Richards *et al* 1995). For some, a relative's imprisonment will offer relief from violent or difficult behaviour at home.



The Effects of Imprisonment

We need to identify how prison effects on families vary over time, as well as between individuals. McDermott and King (1992) distinguished between the traumatic experience of arrest, the overriding uncertainty during remand and trial, and the distinct experiences of families coping with different sentence lengths. However, little is known about prison effects on families over time. Particularly little is known about the effects on partners after prisoners are released. Partners often worry about adjusting when prisoners come home (Noble 1995) and studies of prisoners suggest that the reality of reunion can present profound difficulties for prisoners and their families (Jamieson and Grounds, this volume).

In summary, qualitative accounts have detailed the financial burdens, psychological traumas and practical difficulties that can accompany a relative's imprisonment. However, reliable measurement over time is almost nonexistent in studies of prisoners' families, making it hard to disentangle putative causes and effects.

The effects of imprisonment on children of prisoners

I was very upset and shocked at first. Over three years I have come to terms with it but I had to develop a 'hard streak' and grow up quickly.

(Anonymous boy with father in prison,
quoted in Boswell 2002: 18)

Prisoners' children have been variously referred to as the 'orphans of justice' (Shaw 1992), the 'forgotten victims' of crime (Matthews 1983) and the 'Cinderella of penology' (Shaw 1987). Children can suffer a range of problems during their parent's imprisonment, such as: depression, hyperactivity, aggressive behaviour, withdrawal, regression, clinging behaviour, sleep problems, eating problems, running away, truancy and poor school grades (Boswell and Wedge 2002; Centre for Social and Educational Research 2002; Johnston 1995; Kampfner 1995; Sack *et al* 1976; Sharp and Marcus-Mendoza 2001; Shaw 1987; Skinner and Swartz 1989; Stanton 1980). It is commonly cited that up to 30 per cent of prisoners' children suffer mental health problems, compared to 10 per cent of the general population (Philbrick 1996). However, there appears to be no documented evidence to support this claim. In Morris's study,

49 per cent of prisoners' wives reported adverse changes in children's behaviour since their husbands' imprisonment (Morris 1965). Friedman found that children of jail inmates were more often rated below average in the school world on social, psychological and academic characteristics compared to controls (although subjects were not well matched on ethnicity) (Friedman and Esselstyn 1965). These studies suggest that parental imprisonment is a risk factor for mental health problems among children. However, to determine the actual increase in risk for mental health problems associated with parental imprisonment we need studies with representative samples, well-validated measures and appropriate comparison data.

An important question for sentencing is whether parental imprisonment causes antisocial behaviour and crime in the next generation. Anecdotal evidence suggests that children are at risk of antisocial reactions to parental imprisonment (Johnston 1995; Sack 1977; Sack and Seidler 1978). One boy in Morris's study was discovered by a policeman tampering with car locks and the boy declared his intention of joining his father in prison (Morris 1965: 91). It is frequently stated that children of prisoners are six times more likely than their peers to be imprisoned themselves. However, there appears to be no documented evidence to support this claim (see Johnston 1998, cited in Myers *et al* 1999). Only one study has prospectively examined later-life criminality among children who experienced parental imprisonment. Murray and Farrington (in press) found that, of London-boys who were separated because of parental imprisonment between birth and age 10, 48 per cent were convicted as an adult, compared to 25 per cent of boys who were separated for other reasons. However, these results need replication, especially for girls, and in other social contexts.

The assumption that parental imprisonment causes psychosocial difficulties for children is pervasive in the literature. Although it is a reasonable hypothesis that parental imprisonment causes adverse reactions in children, studies have lacked the methodological sophistication to distinguish the effects of parental imprisonment from the effects of other influences on children. Identifying which factors cause prisoners' children's outcomes is critical to developing the most effective solutions to their problems. I argue that four types of factors should be included in a model of parental imprisonment and child adjustment: selection effects preceding the imprisonment, and direct, mediating and moderating effects following the imprisonment. I explain the meaning of these terms below.

What are selection, mediating and moderating effects?

Selection, mediating and moderating effects occur when extraneous variables influence the relation between an explanatory variable (in this case parental imprisonment) and an outcome variable (in this case child adjustment). A *selection effect* occurs when a pre-existing extraneous variable is associated with the explanatory variable and causes the outcome variable. Selection effects reduce, or eliminate, the association between the explanatory variable and the outcome variable. In other words, selection effects are confounding effects, which can render the association between an explanatory variable and an outcome variable spurious. For example, if parental antisocial behaviour is associated with parental imprisonment and also causes child maladjustment, then parental antisocial behaviour has a selection effect, 'explaining away' the relationship between parental imprisonment and child maladjustment. A *mediator* 'represents the generative mechanism through which the focal independent variable is able to influence the dependent variable of interest' (Baron and Kenny 1986: 1173). In other words, a mediator represents an intervening causal mechanism between the explanatory variable and the outcome variable. For example, if parental imprisonment affects children's adjustment indirectly through a loss of family income, then family income is a mediator in the relation between parental imprisonment and child adjustment. A *moderator* 'is a variable that affects the direction and/or strength of the relation between an independent or predictor variable and a dependent or criterion variable' (Baron and Kenny 1986: 1174). In other words, a moderator changes the effect of an explanatory variable on an outcome variable. For example, if the effect of parental imprisonment on children depends on whether the child is a boy or a girl, then the child's sex is a moderator of the relation between parental imprisonment and child adjustment.³

Selection effects before imprisonment

The damage was done before I came to prison.

(Anonymous prisoner, quoted in Healy *et al* 2000: 23)

Selection effects occur when pre-existing differences between prisoners' children and their peers account for their difference in outcome. Selection effects are likely to exist because parental imprisonment does not occur randomly in the population. Compared to the general population, prisoners are more likely to have been unemployed, to be of low social class, have multiple mental health problems, marital difficulties, and to have their own experiences of abuse and neglect (Dodd and Hunter

1992; Singleton *et al* 1998). Many of these and other conditions associated with parental imprisonment are risk factors for mental health problems in children (see Johnson and Waldfogel 2004).

A notable absence in the literature is consideration of the effects of parental criminality on prisoners' children. Prisoners, by definition, must have at least one criminal conviction (except those on remand). Parental criminal convictions, regardless of the sentences that follow, are a strong independent predictor of children's own criminal and antisocial behaviour in later life (Farrington *et al* 1996). It is possible that the association between parental imprisonment and children's own antisocial and delinquent behaviour is largely explained by parental criminal convictions. If this were the case, parental criminal convictions would have a selection effect on the relationship between parental imprisonment and children's adjustment.

It has been suggested that prisoners' children are also likely to be at genetic risk for antisocial behaviour and mental disorders, even before their parent is imprisoned. In a retrospective study of prisoners' children, Crowe (1974) found that adopted children whose birth mothers were incarcerated were more likely than other adopted children to have been arrested, incarcerated and have a psychiatric record at the age of 25.

If selection hypotheses were true, analysing children's outcomes using suitably matched controls would reduce or eliminate the relationship between parental imprisonment and child maladjustment. Stanton (1980) compared jailed mothers' children with children of mothers on probation in an attempt to control for some pre-existing factors. Jailed mothers' children still performed less well on a number of academic variables compared to probation mothers' children. However, jailed mothers and probation mothers also differed on previous criminal convictions and employment and education histories, which might have confounded the results. In their analysis, Murray and Farrington (in press) found that the association between parental imprisonment and child maladjustment was reduced, but was not eliminated, by controlling for parental convictions and other childhood adversities.

In summary, although pre-existing factors associated with parental imprisonment are risk factors for child maladjustment, we need further evidence on how much they explain the relationship between parental imprisonment and child maladjustment.

Direct prison effects

My six-year-old couldn't sleep. She was a real wreck. After a while

The Effects of Imprisonment

I figured out what the problem was – she thought her father was having to live on bread and water.

(Anonymous mother, quoted in Hounslow *et al* 1982: 23)

Most research emphasises the direct effects of parental imprisonment on children. There are three intrinsic features of imprisonment that might directly cause psychosocial difficulties for children. First, there is the experience of separation and enduring loss. Attachment theory predicts that rupturing of parent–child bonds through separation causes psychosocial difficulties for children (Bowlby 1973). Hounslow *et al* (1982) and Richards (1992) emphasise that parental imprisonment can also be experienced as desertion or abandonment, which can compound distress for children. However, the available evidence on the effects of separation among prisoners' children, and the effects of other forms of parental absence on children, suggests that the separation itself is not likely to be the most salient characteristic explaining children's outcomes (Gabel 2003).

Second, parental imprisonment might cause antisocial behaviour in children if they identify with their parent's criminality and imitate their parent's behaviour. In Sack's (1977) clinic study of eight boys with fathers in prison, some of the boys mimicked their fathers' crimes. Third, parental imprisonment involves uncertainty about how parents are treated while inside prison: children might suffer from fear about their parent's welfare.

Two hypotheses can be drawn from the supposition that imprisonment directly causes difficulties for children. First, one would expect a dose–response effect, with longer sentences and multiple imprisonments being associated with worse outcomes for children. Second, one would expect that positive parent–child contact during the imprisonment would mitigate the effects of separation and uncertainty for children. However, visits also can involve strains of long-distance travel, prison search procedures, a lack of physical contact during visits, and difficulty leaving parents at the end of a visits (Brown *et al* 2002; McDermott and King 1992; Peart and Asquith 1992). Therefore, it is possible that visits might actually cause further difficulties for children. Given the theoretical and policy importance of contact between prisoners and families, the issue is discussed in more detail in the section 'Prisoner–child contact' later in this chapter.

Despite a general assumption in the literature that parental imprisonment directly affects children, there has been little theorising on this subject. We also lack adequate empirical tests of whether parental

imprisonment directly affects children independently of the effects of parental crime, arrest, conviction and other risk factors.

Mediated prison effects

The ways in which parental imprisonment can affect children are probably as varied as the range of parental influences on delinquency.

(Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999: 147)

Mediators represent mechanisms through which parental imprisonment indirectly affects children. Prison effects on prisoner–carer relationships, family income, children’s care arrangements, home and school moves, and carers’ well-being are also likely to have knock-on effects on children (Centre for Social and Educational Research 2002; Hounslow *et al* 1982; Sack 1977). In particular, three influences are likely to mediate the effects of parental imprisonment on children. First, children can face multiple care changes during parental imprisonment, and carers themselves are likely to experience emotional distress and practical difficulties (Stanton 1980). Therefore, it is likely that many children will face a decrease in stable, quality parenting following their parent’s imprisonment. Lowenstein reports that mothers’ personal and familial coping resources actually had a greater impact on children’s adjustment following parental imprisonment than the separation itself (Lowenstein 1986).

Second, explanations given to children about their parent’s absence are likely to mediate the effects of the imprisonment. Two studies report that approximately one-third of children are lied to about the whereabouts of their imprisoned father; one-third are told a fudged truth; and one-third are told the whole truth (Sack and Seidler 1978; Shaw 1987).⁴ Richards *et al* (1994) found that in less than half of prisoners’ families all the children knew about their mothers’ or fathers’ imprisonment. Carers often tell children that their parent is in hospital, or in the army, navy, or other work to try to protect them (Centre for Social and Educational Research 2002). However, researchers and prisoners’ families’ support groups commonly argue that children are better off knowing the truth about their parent’s imprisonment, rather than experiencing confusion and deceit.

Third, parental imprisonment can lead children to experience stigma, bullying and teasing, which might mediate prison effects on children (Boswell and Wedge 2002; Sack 1977; Sack and Seidler 1978; Sack *et al*

1976). A problem for research is that families experiencing stigma are also more likely to practise deceit (Lowenstein 1986). Further, parental imprisonment might have an official labelling effect on children, making them more likely to be prosecuted for their crimes.

Indirect prison effects might be as important as direct effects on prisoners' children, and ought to receive considerably more research attention.

Moderating effects

The child's reactions will obviously vary considerably with age, sophistication, and the previous relationship with both parents...

(Schwartz and Weintraub 1974: 23)

Assuming that parental imprisonment does cause child maladjustment, factors that interact with this effect are called moderators. Moderators can help to understand why some prisoners' children fair better than others. For example, children are likely to react differently to parental imprisonment at different developmental stages (Johnston 1995). Sack (1977) suggested that boys aged six to twelve are the ones most likely to become aggressive in reaction to parental imprisonment. As well as age and sex, individual factors that might moderate children's reactions are: previous experiences of parental imprisonment, race, IQ, temperament and locus of control. However, there is no more than anecdotal evidence on the moderating effects of individual characteristics on children's reactions to parental imprisonment.

Parent-child relationships and parenting practices prior to imprisonment are likely to be important moderating influences on children's reactions. One would expect that if children experienced positive involvement with their parent prior to imprisonment, they would be more adversely affected by the loss. Conversely, children who have experienced abusive relationships might even benefit from parental imprisonment. One study suggests that imprisonment of mothers affects children more acutely than imprisonment of fathers (Richards *et al* 1994), which is likely to be because fathers are less often primary caregivers to children prior to imprisonment (Healy *et al* 2000). Before entering prison, 64 per cent of imprisoned mothers lived with their children, compared to 44 per cent of imprisoned fathers in the US (Mumola 2000).

Children's reactions to parental imprisonment might also vary depending on background levels of social support, parental antisocial behaviour, the type of crime committed by the parent, and possibly by

neighbourhood context. Schwartz hypothesised that in neighbourhoods with high imprisonment rates, children can be more open about their situation, and feel less social stigma (Schwartz and Weintraub 1974). However, stigma might be especially high in neighbourhoods with high imprisonment rates because many victims of crime also live in these neighbourhoods (Braman 2004).

To date, we lack adequate evidence on moderators of prison effects on children, partly because of the difficulties of conducting prospective studies of prisoners' families. In summary, studies have documented a number of possible causes of maladjustment among prisoners' children. However, robust evidence on these effects is slim. Figure 17.1 shows the selection effects, and direct, mediating and moderating effects that are

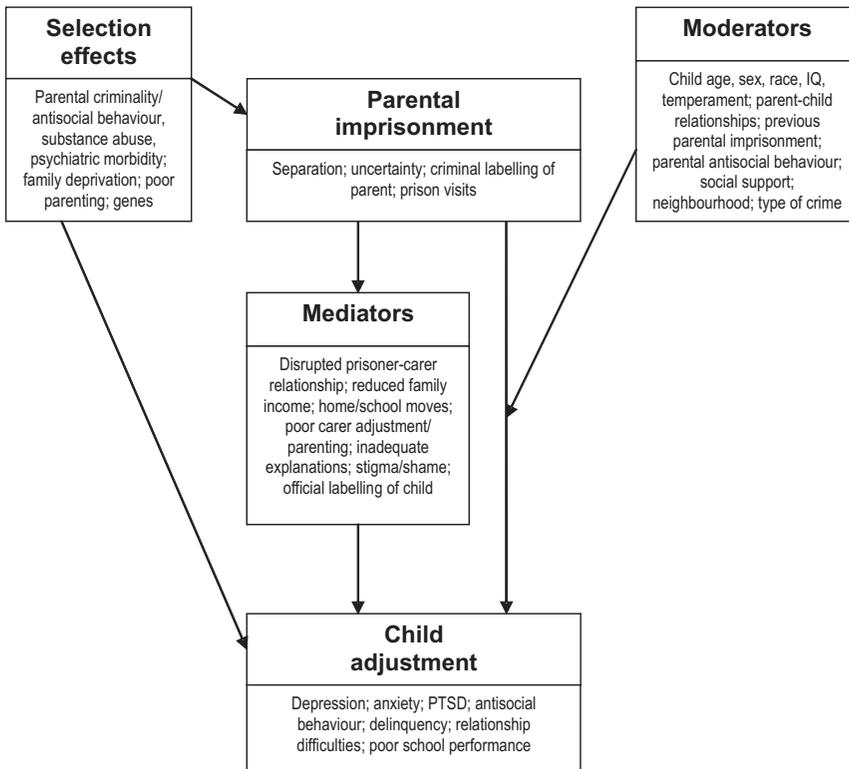


Figure 17.1 The relationship between parental imprisonment and child adjustment

hypothesised to explain the relationship between parental imprisonment and child adjustment. Other interaction effects are possible, for example between moderators and mediated effects; however, these are not shown in Figure 17.1 for simplicity.

Prisoner–child contact

I would make sure people get visits which in turn would keep calmness and closeness.

(Anonymous prisoner)

The Prison Service might reduce the negative effects of parental imprisonment on children by helping prisoners maintain regular and good contact with their children. However, visits are often considered a privilege for prisoners, rather than a right for families, and prison visiting has declined in recent years in the UK (Brooks-Gordon, 2003). Recently, Action for Prisoners' Families (UK) surveyed 134 imprisoned men and 68 imprisoned women in England about their family ties. Notwithstanding relatively low response rates⁵ and the location of the men's prison,⁶ these previously unpublished surveys suggest that prisoners and families can face a number of practical difficulties in maintaining contact. Eighty-one per cent of men reported that family contact was extremely important to them, but only 55 per cent of imprisoned fathers were visited by their children. Ninety-five per cent of women reported that family contact was extremely important to them, but only 67 per cent of imprisoned mothers were visited by their children. The absence of visits appeared to relate to practical difficulties of travelling, distance between prison and home, the cost of travel, and visiting times.

Most imprisoned parents and their children try to keep in contact by mail and telephone calls as well as by visits. In Mumola's study, 43 per cent of state inmates and 73 per cent of federal inmates had at least monthly contact with their children by telephone (Mumola 2000). In the surveys conducted by Action for Prisoners' Families, the main factor associated with prisoner–family telephone contact was the cost of calls.

Prisoners who talk with their children adjust better to the prison environment (Carlson and Cervera 1991). Children might also adjust better during the separation if they have more contact with their imprisoned parent. Although practitioners and researchers often stress the importance of contact for prisoners' children, recent evidence suggests children can be negatively affected by involvement with an

antisocial father (Jaffee *et al* 2003). In the context of divorce, what is important for children is contact involving authoritative parenting and close relationships (Amato and Gilbreth 1999). In the prison context, active, close parenting is extremely difficult to achieve. Adolescents report mixed experiences of visiting, as they feel there is no time to talk individually, visiting can be frightening, take too long, involve unpleasant searches, and facilities tend to be physically uncomfortable (Brown *et al* 2002). Children can find visits confusing, frightening and upsetting (Richards *et al* 1994). Morris (1965) found that closed visits (behind glass) were regarded by wives as horrific: children tended to experience them with bewilderment and fear. Nevertheless, children generally seem to like having contact with their imprisoned parent (Boswell and Wedge 2002) and most adolescents say that contact is extremely important to them (Brown *et al* 2002). Children's visits and all-day family visits, although rare in the UK prison system, are seen much more favourably by visitors than normal visits (Lloyd 1992).

Only three studies have examined the effects of parent-child contact on child adjustment specifically in the prison context. In their clinic study, Sack and Seidler (1978) found that children were less disruptive after making initial visits to see their fathers in jail. Stanton (1980) found that *satisfactory* visits between children and jailed mothers appeared to lower a child's anxiety about their mother's absence, although 'satisfactory' visits were not defined in the study. Fritsch and Burkhead (1981) found that inmates who had more contact with children actually reported their children had more problems. However, results from this study are ambiguous because prisoners with more contact might just have been more aware of their children's difficulties.

To test the effect of parent-child contact on children during parental imprisonment, future studies should measure child well-being using different sources, control for parent-child relations prior to imprisonment, and devise sensitive measures of different types of contact.

Methods for studying prisoners' children

Understanding child adjustment during parental imprisonment requires separating out a complicated series of selection effects, and direct, mediating and moderating effects. The general model of child adjustment proposed here reflects, in several ways, well-known models of prisoner adjustment. The hypothesis of selection effects parallels importation models of prisoner adjustment. The hypothesis of direct and mediated prison effects parallels deprivation models of prisoner adjustment.

Including both selection effects and prison effects parallels combined models of prisoners' adjustment. Research on prisoners also highlights the importance of understanding individual differences. Reflecting this concern, the model proposed here emphasises moderating effects on children's reactions to parental imprisonment. Research on prisoners also shows the need for sophisticated and sensitive research design to disentangle 'imported' from prison-caused outcomes, and to protect an already vulnerable group. Similar requirements apply to research on the effects of parental imprisonment on children.

To date, research on prisoners' children has been hampered by methodological weaknesses (Gabel 1992; Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999). Among 43 studies of prisoners' families and children that I have found, only thirteen included any direct interviews with prisoners' children; only ten used standardised instruments or official records to measure children's outcomes; only seven reported using a longitudinal design; only one followed up prisoners' children for more than one year; and only ten used any sort of control group to try to isolate the specific effects of imprisonment on children. Most studies have used convenience samples from clinics, visitors' centres or prisoners' families' support groups, with attendant biases. No study researched prisoners' families prospectively (starting before the imprisonment took place).

It is not surprising that research on prisoners' families has been methodologically weak. Prisoners' families are a neglected group, which makes research practically very difficult (Hounslow *et al* 1982). Recruiting a random sample of prisoners' families in the UK is virtually impossible because no statutory agency holds their contact details. The best way, in practice, of trying to obtain a random sample of prisoners' families is by first interviewing prisoners. However, prisoners are often (understandably) unwilling for researchers to contact their families, and it is well documented that prisoners' families are reluctant to respond to official or independent enquiry (Johnston 1995).

The challenge for future research is to establish tight causal links between variables highlighted by previous qualitative research. Experimental designs are the best designs for testing causal hypotheses. However, the nature of imprisonment implies that, at best, research is likely to be quasi-experimental. A good quasi-experimental study of the effects of parental imprisonment on children would have a prospective, longitudinal design. It would include many at-risk children, and reliable measures of many background variables, including adjustment of children before, during and after parental imprisonment. It is rare that existing large-scale studies of child development have collected information on parental imprisonment. The *Fragile Families and Child*



Wellbeing Study (Princeton University 2004) is the most promising current study for the investigation of the effects of imprisonment on families and children. Although children in the study are still young, the *Fragile Families Study* has over-sampled high-risk families at the time of children's births, and has collected detailed information on family background and parenting measures, as well as parental criminal and imprisonment histories. We must hope that this, and similar research, attracts the resources to rigorously identify the impacts of imprisonment on families and children.

Conclusion

Prisoners' families and children can experience profound social, psychological and economic losses as a result of their relative's imprisonment. Researching the impact of events such as imprisonment through the life-course requires use of quantitative and qualitative data (Sampson and Laub 1993). However, to date, practically all studies of prison effects on families and children have been small, qualitative investigations, and have rarely included longitudinal follow-up. Four important questions remain:

- 1 What is the actual risk associated with parental imprisonment for children's mental health problems and antisocial behaviour?
- 2 Is parental imprisonment merely a 'risk marker', or is it a cause of child maladjustment?
- 3 If parental imprisonment is a cause of child maladjustment, what are the mechanisms by which it affects children?
- 4 Which interventions or policy changes could prevent the effects of parental imprisonment on children?

To help identify possible mechanisms, a model has been proposed here which separates out selection effects, direct and mediated prison effects, and moderating effects. What we need now are large-scale research projects to properly investigate prison effects on children and families through the life-course. Children experiencing other forms of separation from parents have attracted huge research projects leading to sophisticated understanding of children's adjustment, following divorce for example. Prisoners' children deserve the same research attention and, in all probability, deserve at least similar resources of support. Despite an

impressive awareness of prisoners' rights, no statutory body, in prisons or in the community, is charged with responsibility for supporting the families of prisoners in the UK (HM Treasury 2003). Without serious efforts at research, intervention and support, prison will continue to punish these 'forgotten victims', and may contribute to increased levels of crime in the next generation.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to Adrian Grounds for support of my work on this topic, David Farrington for thoughts on particular sections of this chapter and to the ESRC for funding the research
- 2 My calculations from Morris's results. I have combined all levels of deterioration, defined by Morris as 'slight', 'substantial' or 'serious' (see Morris 1965: 215–24).
- 3 See Kraemer *et al* (2001) for a good description of mediators and moderators, and other ways risk factors can work together.
- 4 But see McEvoy *et al* (1999) for different estimates in Northern Ireland.
- 5 Approximately 27 per cent for men and 85 per cent for women.
- 6 HMP Camphill is on the Isle of Wight off the south coast of England.

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