After a childhood with a parent in prison – relationships and well-being as a child and young adult

Per-Åke Nylander, Åsa Källström and Karin Hellfeldt

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore whether young adults who had a parent in prison while growing up in Sweden are disadvantaged in terms of parental support, school well-being and functioning, and socioemotional and/or behavioral problems, compared to young adults whose parents were not in prison when they were a child.

Design/methodology/approach – Retrospective self-report information about parental imprisonment and childhood and adulthood welfare was collected from 2,500 Swedish young adults as part of the RESUME project. Of these, 52 who had had a parent in prison during their childhood were compared to the young adults who had not had a parent in prison, by measuring differences concerning their family relations, school well-being, and well-being as adults, and the risk of some events occurring later in life.

Findings – Having had a parent in prison was significantly related to feeling less loved during childhood, and having less contact and support from both parents during adulthood, in comparison with other young adults. In school they experienced lower well-being and were more often placed in special education than other children. They were at greater risk of not attending higher education, of planning or attempting suicide, and of being hospitalized for mental health problems than the rest of the young adults.

Research limitations/implications – Taking into consideration the complexity of childhood conditions and the limitations of retrospective data, prison, and social-services, professionals should pay special attention to the fact that a child has a parent in prison.

Originality/value – This is a unique study of young adults’ experiences of a childhood with parent in prison.

Keywords Young adults, Prison, Relationships, Well-being, Children, Parent

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The children of imprisoned parents are seen as a vulnerable group, exposed to many kinds of difficulties in their childhood, not least when it comes to maintaining their relationship with the imprisoned parent (Dawson et al., 2012; Murray et al., 2012). Prison time is often accompanied by a deteriorating relationship between parent and child, and many families are likely to be dissolved (Western et al., 2004). When a parent is imprisoned, the child may thus be directly affected by the experience of separation and enduring loss (Murray, 2005). This process might be more or less traumatizing, depending on the circumstances and how they are explained to the child (Murray et al., 2012; Phillips and Zhao, 2010). The children might also experience difficulty maintaining contact with their parent in prison, as the active support of caregivers and relatives is often a necessary condition of this (Shlafer and Poehlmann, 2010) and they frequently need coaching to be able to visit their parent or to write a letter (Nesmith and Ruhland, 2011). Telephone contact and child-friendly visiting environments are important to keeping up a previously good parent-child relationship, while visits are less important when the child-parent relationship was already bad before the imprisonment (Sharratt, 2014). Prisons in different countries differ in the extent to which they have child-friendly visiting environments. This study explores whether young adults...
who had a parent in prison while growing up in Sweden are disadvantaged compared to other young adults. 

The research on the proximal effects of parental incarceration on children’s well-being and behavior during childhood has come to various results. First, in some studies (Cho, 2011) children of prisoners exhibit poorer school achievement and lower attendance than other children, or are at greater risk of dropping out, while a meta-analysis does not find higher levels of poor educational performance among children of imprisoned parents (Murray et al., 2012). These children’s own perception of their school well-being does not seem to have been studied very much. In a Swedish interview study with 50 children of imprisoned parents, most participants report no school problems. A subgroup of children with less support from home, however, report problems with school achievement and performance. Few of the 50 children have experienced being bullied in school because they have a parent in prison (Berman et al., 2013). Similar results were found in an American qualitative interview study including 34 children, in which a majority of children with incarcerated parents report doing well at school (Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008). Second, children often grieve the loss of their imprisoned parent, which can affect them very differently (Shlafer and Poehlmann, 2010; Nesmith and Ruhland, 2011). Some studies compare this to post-traumatic stress (Bocknek et al., 2009) and consider it a potential predictor of childhood trauma (Arditti and Savla, 2015; Shlafer and Poehlmann, 2010), while others argue that the children have feelings of alienation or injustice (Shlafer and Poehlmann, 2010; Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008). Children may also feel embarrassment and shame (Tudball, 2000). Children with parents in prison are at risk of being discriminated against and suffering other forms of stigmatization (Beck and Jones, 2007; Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008). Third, all of the above could have an impact on children’s alcohol and drug abuse, mental health problems, and antisocial behavior. Some studies have found higher levels of drug abuse and mental health problems among these children (Murray et al., 2009), while others have not (Murray et al., 2012). Some studies found significantly higher levels of antisocial behavior and conduct problems requiring disciplinary measures (Murray et al., 2009, 2012; Trice and Brewster, 2004), while this was not found in other studies (e.g. Murray et al., 2007).

It is important to remember that not all children suffer from the incarceration of a parent. To some children, it could bring relief to a chaotic home situation characterized by drug abuse and criminality (DeHart and Altshuler, 2009; Beck and Jones, 2007). The situation can be further complicated if other family members have been seriously injured or killed by the imprisoned parent. Similarly, when the reason for imprisonment includes family violence or sexual abuse of the child, the child might understandably have mixed feelings concerning the parent (DeHart and Altshuler, 2009). Even if these and similar circumstances complicate the situation for the child, they do not preclude feelings of attachment and loss in relation to the imprisoned parent. 

The research on long-term effects of experiencing a childhood with an imprisoned parent is more limited. Murray and Farrington (2008) found that children of incarcerated parents were at greater risk of adverse outcomes later in life, when controlling for other risk factors. In Sweden, parental incarceration during childhood predicted later antisocial and criminal behavior, but the effects of parental incarceration disappeared after controlling for parents’ criminality (Murray et al., 2007). Lee et al. (2013) found that exposure to paternal incarceration in childhood was associated with health problems in young adulthood, but while paternal incarceration raises the risk of several physical and mental health problems, maternal incarceration only raises the probability of depression. In Sweden, a study found that young adults who had experienced having a parent in prison have higher levels of ADHD and depression symptoms (Källström et al., in review) than others. A US longitudinal study found moderately heightened levels of serious youth delinquency among 16-year olds with an incarcerated parent, compared to those with no incarcerated parent (Kjellstrand and Eddy, 2011). Incarcerated mothers self-reported having incarcerated adult children 2.5 times more than did incarcerated men (Dallaire, 2007). Other studies have found that children of imprisoned parents internalize life problems for a long time, compared to similar risk-groups, even when controlling for other traditional risk factors in childhood (Murray and Farrington, 2008). The long-term connections between experiencing parental imprisonment during childhood and subsequent education, relationship to parents in adulthood, and well-being in life are less
studied areas. Some have argued that having an imprisoned parent, together with other consequences this has for the family, harms school performance and socialization processes (Johnston, 1995).

Of course, establishing a distinct causal relation between childhood experiences and conditions later in life is fraught with difficulties. In the developmental and theoretical literature, however, it has been found that people’s relationships with their parents also affect them later in life. One example is the attachment theory, which identifies different dysfunctional attachment patterns later in life, following problems with attachment in early years (Bowlby, 1979). So, one could start from the assumption that parental imprisonment, together with many other related problems (with household economy, social welfare, psychological development, parental, and school support, etc.) affect many of these children negatively, even if it is not possible to establish the exact causal relations involved.

One means of gaining insight into the long-term consequences of parental incarceration can be to use retrospective data. A retrospective design offers a longitudinal approach combined with a shorter period of data collection. A limitation in using childhood data that is self-reported later in life is that the conditions reported might not truly reflect the conditions as they were. Limitations in self-reported retrospection are a well-known problem in research. There are limitations in our memory, and several kinds of bias that might hamper the use of self-reported data to track events and conditions early in life. There are similar discussions on biases in research on, e.g., decision making or unemployment events, based on retrospective data (cf. Jacobs, 2002).

In this paper, the relationships studied are limited to personal relationships, which are regular, important interactions between human beings, in a certain context. “Well-being” is an expression with several meanings, and is extensively discussed in the literature. It is suggested that having, being and relating are essential actions in a dynamic well-being model that could be generally applied to many contexts (Roesser and Galloway, 2002). Well-being could of course be measured by objective and subjective indicators (Andrews and Withey, 1978/2012). In short, well-being could be defined as a good or satisfactory condition of existence, often related to health, the “good” and happiness, or simply, “the state of being comfortable, healthy or happy” (Oxford Dictionary). In the present study, a number of items on social and health-related items are used. School well-being is often used to refer to how time spent in regular school is apprehended primarily by a child, but also by other persons present. It is argued to be closely connected to relationships, and to experiencing recognition in the school environment (Thomas et al., 2016). In the present study, however, it is only possible to present the interviewed young adults’ own subjective apprehensions of their overall school well-being, in single items for primary school and for secondary school. Still, this study contributes some specific variables and the use of a retrospective design to the research on experiences of having a parent in prison.

The purpose of this study is to explore whether young adults who had a parent in prison while growing up in Sweden are disadvantaged in terms of parental support, school well-being and functioning, and socioemotional and/or behavioral problems, compared to young adults whose parents were not in prison when they were a child. This is done by answering these specific questions:

1. Do young adults who as a child had a parent in prison report lower school well-being and functioning during childhood and/or less attendance in upper-secondary school and higher education than those who did not experience having a parent in prison?

2. Do young adults who, as children, had a parent in prison report less supportive relationships with their mother and father (and to other important adults) during their childhood and/or as adults than those who did not experience having a parent in prison?

3. Do young adults who, as children, had a parent in prison report more socioemotional disadvantages and/or behavioral problems as adults than those who did not experience having a parent in prison?

Methods

This study used data from the national retrospective study of 2,500 young people’s own experiences during childhood and well-being in young adulthood (the Retrospective Study of Young People’s Experiences – the RESUME project, Cater et al., 2014), commissioned by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare and conducted in 2011.
Participants

Participants in the RESUME project were selected from members of the Swedish population born during the years 1987-1991, using a national inhabitant register from the national agency Statistics Sweden, which holds demographic information on all Swedish citizens. Random selection was constrained to proportional draws based on gender and county of residence (for more detailed information about the sampling procedure and attrition, see (Cater et al., 2014). New respondents were added to the study until the target of 2,500 participants was reached. The final sample included 47.4 percent men and 52.6 percent women, aged 20-24 years ($M = 22.1$), at the time of data collection. Of the 2,500 included adults, 52 (2 percent) reported that at least one of their parents was in prison at some point when they were children. This study focuses on those 52 in relation to the other 2,448.

Procedure

Following approval by the regional ethical review board in Uppsala, Sweden (No. 2010/463), potential study participants were selected from the national inhabitant register and contacted by telephone by staff at a Swedish survey and marketing company (Markör). This company was commissioned by the research team overseeing the project to recruit participants and collect data. The interviewers/questionnaire administrators were required to have previous experience of conducting interviews of a sensitive nature and were not younger than 30 years old. They were trained by the researchers in interviewing techniques, especially in interviews focusing on sensitive topics.

Potential participants were initially contacted by telephone, at which time the recruiter provided information about the project following a script developed by the research team. If the person was interested in participating in the study, written information about the purpose of the study, the voluntary participation, consent, etc. was sent by e-mail. The recruiter allowed him/her to choose a time and location for the interview and questionnaire.

Most participants chose to answer the questionnaire and be interviewed at home, others in a public place such as a library or at the offices of the survey company. At the interview, the interviewer again gave both written and verbal information about the study, following a script developed by the research team. Then the participants were asked to and did sign a written consent form for participation in the study.

Interviewers first gathered basic demographic information in a brief structured verbal interview, which was digitally recorded on an iPad. The participant then used the iPad to independently fill out the rest of the questionnaire as a self-report survey. The interviewer was present to answer any questions, but could not see the answers given. After this, participants received a SEK400 voucher that can be used in a variety of stores nationwide. In all, the data collection took an average of 90 minutes per session.

Measures

*Having had a parent in prison during childhood.* The question: “Were either of your parents ever imprisoned?” was answered by checking “Yes” or “No” for the father and the mother, respectively.

*Childhood school functioning and education level as adult.* School well-being was assessed using two items (“How well did you enjoy primary school?” and “How well did you enjoy secondary school?”). The two items were answered on a four-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very well). In this study, the scales were dichotomized by grouping values 1 and 2 into “negative” and values 3 and 4 into “positive.”

To assess the education level of adults, three items were used. The question: “How well did you enjoy upper-secondary school?” could also be answered “I did not attend upper-secondary school.” The question “For any period during compulsory school did you go to a special school or special class because you needed extra support?” was answered by checking “Yes” or “No.” The question: “Have you begun college-level studies?” was answered by checking “Yes” or “No.”
Relationship with parents in childhood and as an adult. To assess parental love, respondents answered the question “When you grew up, how often did your parents explicitly show you that they loved you, for example, by telling you or giving you a hug or kiss?” on a four-point scale, ranging from 1 (very rarely or never) to 4 (very often) for the father and the mother, respectively. For this study, the answers were dichotomized into “Felt loved” (value 3 or 4) and “Did not feel loved” (1 or 2). The question “From whom do you get (emotional or practical) support when you need it?” was answered by checking “mother,” “father,” “sibling,” “other relative,” “friend/s,” “colleague or fellow student,” “professional person,” “boy- or girlfriend” or “other.” They could check several of these alternatives. The question “How would you describe your relationship with your parents today?” was answered on a four-point scale ranging from 1 (not close at all) to 4 (very close). For this study, the answers were dichotomized into “negative” (values 1 or 2) and “positive” (values 3 or 4). The question “How often do you see your parents or talk with them on the phone, chat, mail or have contact with them on the internet?” was answered on an eight-point scale for the father and the mother, respectively. The scale included the following response alternatives: 1 (never), 2 (extremely rarely, e.g. on major holidays), 3 (at least once a month), 4 (a few times a month), 5 (about once a week), 6 (several times a week), and 7 (daily). For this study, the scale was dichotomized into “Infrequent” (values 1 or 2) and “Often” (values 3 to 7).

Emotional and behavioral problems as adults. To measure suicide ideation, suicide attempts, and self-harm, respondents were asked to respond to the following statements: “Have you ever thought about taking your own life?,” “Have you ever attempted suicide?,” and “Have you ever purposely harmed yourself without wanting to die?” All questions used the following five-point response scale: 1 (no), 2 (once), 3 (a few times), 4 (many times, regularly), and 5 (many times during a short period and then with a long gap in between). The question: “Have you ever been hospitalized for psychiatric problems?” was answered by “No,” “Yes, on one occasion” or “Yes, on several occasions.” The question: “Have you ever been arrested by the police for something you did?” was answered by a five-point scale ranging from 1 (no, it has never happened) to 5 (more than ten times). For this study, these scales were dichotomized into not having had the problem (1) and having had the problem (2 and above).

Analyses

Many variables in this study contain scales that could not be treated as parametric, but only as ordinal or nominal. These have been dichotomized into two sustainable alternatives: presence or absence. Those who reported having had a parent in prison are then compared to those not reporting having had a parent in prison during childhood for each variable using $\chi^2$. In some of the analyses, $\chi^2$ is not possible to use due to small group sizes, and instead a two-tailed Fischer’s exact test is computed. Relative risk or risk ratio (RR) is the ratio of the probability of an event (e.g. a disease or disadvantage) occurring in a vulnerable group to the probability of the same event occurring in a comparison group that is not vulnerable. In this case, RR was used to compare the risk of a negative life event for those who did and did not have a parent in prison during childhood.

Results

Out of the 2,500 participants in the study, 52 (2 percent) had experienced at least one of their parents being in prison when they were a child. Of these, four had their mother in prison and 50 had their father in prison. Two had both their parents incarcerated at some point during their childhood. They were too few to be treated separately in the statistics.

Childhood school functioning and educational level as an adult

First, the relation between having had a parent in prison during childhood and different aspects of childhood and adult school functioning are studied. In Table I, the relation between having or not having had a parent in prison and school well-being is presented. Of those who had experienced having a parent in prison as a child, 60 percent reported high school well-being in primary school. Of those who had not had a parent in prison, 70 percent answered the same. This difference was not significant on the 0.05 level, however.
The vast majority of the RESUME group as a whole did attend upper-secondary school. Of those who had experienced having a parent in prison as a child, 60 percent reported high school well-being in upper-secondary school. This was significantly less than the 83 percent of those who had not had a parent in prison, $\chi^2(1) = 15.9$, $p < 0.001$.

Table II shows that it was significantly more common to have attended special education (specialskola or specialklass) among those who have had a parent in prison (31 percent), than among the others (15 percent) $\chi^2(1) = 10.1$, $p < 0.01$. It further shows that significantly fewer of those who reported having a parent in prison attended upper-secondary school (gymnasieskolan) than those who did not (Fischer’s test, $p < 0.01$). Of those who had experienced having a parent in prison, 8 percent reported not attending upper-secondary school. Less than 1 percent of the other study participants reported this. The risk of not attending upper-secondary school was 11 times higher for those who had had a parent in prison than for the others.

The two groups were also compared on participation in higher education (meaning university or college-level education). Among those who had a parent in prison, 62 percent did not attend higher education, while 41 percent of other respondents did not, $\chi^2 (1) = 8.6$, $p < 0.01$. The relative risk of not going to college was 1.5, or, if reported in percent, the probability of missing higher education was 50 percent higher for those reporting having had a parent in prison, than for the rest.

**Childhood and adult relations with parents**

In Table III, the relation between having parents in prison and different relationship aspects are presented. It was significantly less common for those who had a parent in prison to report often having felt loved by their father during childhood (33 percent) than for those who did not (67 percent), $\chi^2 (1) = 27.4$, $p < 0.001$.

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### Table I

Comparison of prevalence and differences in school well-being indicators between the children with and without a parent in prison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School well-being indicator</th>
<th>Parent in prison</th>
<th>No parent in prison</th>
<th>$\chi^2$ value</th>
<th>$p$-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Much school well-being in compulsory school</td>
<td>31/52 60</td>
<td>1,712/2,449 70</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Much school well-being in upper-secondary school</td>
<td>29/48 60</td>
<td>2,009/2,431 83</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>$p &lt; 0.001$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: ns, not significant*

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### Table II

Comparison of prevalence and relative risk of some education-related events, between the children who did and did not have a parent in prison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education-related events</th>
<th>Parent in prison</th>
<th>No parent in prison</th>
<th>$\chi^2$ value</th>
<th>$p$-value</th>
<th>Risk ratio (RR)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Had special education in compulsory school</td>
<td>15/52 31</td>
<td>363/244 9.15</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>$p &lt; 0.01$</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not attending upper-secondary school</td>
<td>4/52 8</td>
<td>17/2,448 &lt; 1</td>
<td>F-test</td>
<td>$p &lt; 0.01$</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not attending higher education</td>
<td>32/52 62</td>
<td>1,010/24 48.41</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>$p &lt; 0.01$</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: F-test, Fischer’s exact test*
Concerning feeling loved by their mothers, the differences between the respondents are also significant. Among those who have had a parent in prison, 75 percent often felt loved by their mother as a child while among those who did not have a parent in prison, 86 percent often felt loved by their mother, $\chi^2 (1) = 5.6, p < 0.05$.

Concerning support from parents, 31 percent of those who had a parent in prison during childhood, reported getting support from their father, compared to 69 percent of those who did not have a parent in prison during childhood, $\chi^2 (1) = 33.6, p < 0.01$. Similarly, concerning support from their mother, 67 percent of the young adults who had experienced having a parent in prison reported receiving such support, compared with 82 percent of those with no parent in prison, $\chi^2 (1) = 7.5, p < 0.01$. Concerning support from siblings, partners, friends, colleagues, and professionals, the differences were small and not significant between those who had had a parent in prison and those who had not. However, receiving support from relatives was reported by 48 percent of those who reported having had a parent in prison and by 23 percent of those who did not, $\chi^2 (1) = 17.5, p < 0.01$. In short, the young adults with experiences of having a parent in prison received significantly less support from their parents, but significantly more from their relatives.

Examining the closeness of the child-parent relationship, 82 percent of those reporting having had a parent in prison assessed their relationship to their mother as “close,” while 95 percent of the others did so, $p < 0.01$, two-tailed Fisher’s exact test. Concerning relationships to fathers, 50 percent of those with a parent who had been in prison regarded their relationship with their father as close, while 86 percent of the remaining respondents did so, $\chi^2 (1) = 44.2, p < 0.001$.

When reporting current frequency of contact with their mother, 14 percent of those who had experienced having a parent in prison answered “seldom,” compared to only 1 percent of the

**Table III** Comparison of prevalence of parent-child relationship aspects between the children with a parent in prison and the children without a parent in prison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship aspect</th>
<th>Parent in prison Number</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>No parent in prison Number</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>$\chi^2$-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Felt loved by father often</td>
<td>17/52</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1,647/2,448</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>p &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt loved by mother often</td>
<td>38/52</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>2,117/2,448</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>p &lt; 0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gets support from father</td>
<td>15/52</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1,683/2,448</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>p &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gets support from mother</td>
<td>17/52</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>437/2,448</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>p &lt; 0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gets support from relative</td>
<td>25/52</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>567/2,448</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>p &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gets support from siblings</td>
<td>26/52</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1,361/2,448</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>$p = 0.42ns$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gets support from partner</td>
<td>23/52</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>1,166/2,448</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>$p = 0.63ns$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gets support from friends</td>
<td>40/52</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>1,965/2,448</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>$p = 0.55ns$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gets support from colleagues</td>
<td>12/52</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>532/2,448</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>$p = 0.82ns$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gets support from professionals</td>
<td>6/52</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>224/2,448</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>F-test</td>
<td>p = 0.47ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close relationship with father</td>
<td>22/46</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2,033/2,376</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>p &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close relationship with mother</td>
<td>41/50</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>2,296/2,405</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>F-test</td>
<td>p &lt; 0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrequent contact with father</td>
<td>16/46</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>137/2,376</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>F-test</td>
<td>p &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrequent contact with mother</td>
<td>7/50</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>38/2,405</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>F-test</td>
<td>p &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** F-test, Fischer’s exact test; ns, not significant

Concerning feeling loved by their mothers, the differences between the respondents are also significant. Among those who have had a parent in prison, 75 percent often felt loved by their mother as a child while among those who did not have a parent in prison, 86 percent often felt loved by their mother, $\chi^2 (1) = 5.9, p < 0.05$.

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Examining the closeness of the child-parent relationship, 82 percent of those reporting having had a parent in prison assessed their relationship to their mother as “close,” while 95 percent of the others did so, $p < 0.01$, two-tailed Fisher’s exact test. Concerning relationships to fathers, 50 percent of those with a parent who had been in prison regarded their relationship with their father as close, while 86 percent of the remaining respondents did so, $\chi^2 (1) = 44.2, p < 0.001$.

When reporting current frequency of contact with their mother, 14 percent of those who had experienced having a parent in prison answered “seldom,” compared to only 1 percent of the
other respondents, \( p < 0.01 \), two-tailed Fisher’s exact test. Concerning current frequency of contact with their father, 36 percent of those reporting having had a parent in prison answered seldom, while 6 percent of the remainder did so, \( p < 0.01 \), two-tailed Fisher’s exact test.

**Behavioral and emotional problems as adults**

In this section, the relation between having a parent in prison and differences in the occurrence of events of socioemotional or behavioral character will be reported.

Respondents whose parents had been in prison reported higher levels of suicide ideation and suicide attempts than those who did not have parents in prison during childhood (see Table IV). However, these differences were not significant. The relative risk of suicide ideation was 1.4, meaning a 40 percent higher risk for those whose parent had been in prison than for those without that experience. The risk of suicide attempts among those reporting having had a parent in prison was twice as high as that among children who did not have a parent in prison.

Having a parent in prison during childhood was also related to self-harm. Of those with parents in prison, 25 percent reported having intentionally caused themselves harm, compared to 14 percent of the other respondents, \( \chi^2 (1) = 4.5, p < 0.05 \). The relative risk of self-harm was 1.7, indicating that the probability of self-harm was 70 percent higher among those with parents in prison during childhood.

Among those responding they had had a parent in prison, 12 percent had been in hospital psychiatric care for mental health problems, compared to 5 percent among the rest of the participants in the study, \( p < 0.05 \), two-tailed Fisher’s exact test. The relative risk for the former to experience hospital psychiatric care was 2.4. Around 8 percent of the young adults who have had a parent in prison and 4 percent of the rest had been arrested by the police at least once, a difference that was not significant.

In sum, those with parents in prison during childhood reported significant higher levels of self-harm and hospital psychiatric care for mental health problems than those who did not have a parent in prison during childhood. They also reported higher levels of suicide ideation, suicide attempts, and being arrested by the police. These differences were not statistically significant, however.

**Discussion/conclusions**

The aim of this study was to examine whether young adults who had a parent in prison during childhood are disadvantaged in terms of school well-being, parental support, and socioemotional and behavior problems, compared to young adults whose parents were not in prison when

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event in life</th>
<th>Parent in prison</th>
<th>No parent in prison</th>
<th>( \chi^2 ) value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>Risk ratio (RR)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suicide ideation</td>
<td>21/46 33%</td>
<td>532/2,311 23%</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide attempts</td>
<td>5/52 10%</td>
<td>119/2,444 5%</td>
<td>F-test ns</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentional self-harm</td>
<td>12/49 25%</td>
<td>330/2,336 14%</td>
<td>( p &lt; 0.05 ) F-test p &lt; 0.05</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitalization for mental health problems</td>
<td>6/52 12%</td>
<td>119/2,448 5%</td>
<td>F-test ns</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrested by the police</td>
<td>4/52 8%</td>
<td>96/2,448 4%</td>
<td>F-test ns</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** F-test, Fischer’s exact test; ns, not significant
they were children. How parental incarceration is related to school well-being has not been studied much in previous research. School well-being and positive school adjustment have been argued to be key factors in promoting positive educational and behavioral outcomes in children’s lives (Bond et al., 2007). Results from this study indicate that children with incarcerated parents tend to report not only more negative experiences of school in terms of well-being but also a greater risk of being placed in special education. Of course, being placed in a small group outside the ordinary classroom could be beneficial for the child’s learning, but it is also a kind of stigmatization of the child. This is important because other studies have indicated that these children might already be struggling with the stigma of having a parent in prison (Beck and Jones, 2007; Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008). Both having a parent in prison and being placed in special education could therefore amount to a double stigma for these children. Children with incarcerated parents also tend not to continue to upper-secondary school and to higher education. Not attending upper-secondary school after the nine years of compulsory schooling is rare in Sweden. The surprisingly large proportion of children with a parent in prison who experienced this may be explained by less support, less motivation, poorer preparation, etc., but our data cannot give answers to this question. Regardless of the reason behind the negative school outcomes that children with parents in prison report in this study, one could argue that the issue is deserving of more attention. The results from this study indicate that children with a parent in prison may be disadvantaged in relation to educational factors, and may be in need of different forms of school support.

The importance of children’s relationships to their parents for their development and mental health is a well-researched area and a well-documented subject in the literature. Children who had a parent in prison during their childhood seem to be disadvantaged in many respects. In one of the relational aspects, they reported fewer feelings of being loved as child. The imprisoned parent is most often the father. But feeling loved does not directly depend on the parent being physically present at home, so there may also be other explanations for the differences in feeling of being loved than the parent’s absence. In their life as young adults, they report less frequent contact and poorer relationships with both their mothers and their fathers, than those who did not have a parent in prison. They also report receiving less support from their parents. All these disadvantages could be interpreted as indicators of attachment problems to their parents. On the other hand, the children who had a parent in prison report receiving more support from other relatives. This may be a result of relatives having taken over some of the parental responsibilities while the parent was imprisoned. From an “attachment perspective,” this could be a possibility to attach to other significant persons, in absence of their parent or parents. In that case their attachment to relatives could have served to reduce some of their problems in childhood, and later in life. It is important to state that the differences reported above concerning feelings of being loved by, having contact with, receiving support from, and having a good relationship with their parents do not apply to all their other personal relationships. On the contrary, for other items measured in the study, such as receiving support from siblings, partner, friends, colleagues, and professionals, there were no or only small differences.

The children who have had a parent in prison seem more frequently to have planned or attempted suicide. This is only a tendency, since the differences are not significant, however, it is still worth taking into account when thinking about these children in a broader perspective. There is also a significant difference in self-harm behavior and a higher reported risk. Even if this is a much more common behavior than, say, attempting suicide among all young people, it is still an important signal of not being satisfied with oneself. The significant difference and higher risk of hospitalization for mental health issues adds to the picture of disadvantage among the children who had a parent in prison during childhood. Having been arrested was twice as common among children/young adults who had a parent in prison than the others. The low prevalence in both groups makes this difference not significant, and the conclusion should perhaps simply be that, fortunately, few young people are arrested regardless of whether or not they have had a parent in prison.

Limitations

This study offers important insights into the lives of children with parents in prison, giving a broad overview of aspects that may be related to parent’s imprisonment. However, the results
of this study must be interpreted in relation to its limitations. In the RESUME project, the items concerning prison are few in number and do not provide enough detail about such things as the length of the prison term and the character of the prison. To fully understand the situation for children with parents in prison, other aspects related to parental imprisonment need to be examined in future research. The timing of the parent’s imprisonment, the number of years spent away from home, and the reason for the prison sentence are just a few of the many relevant factors that could explain individual differences in children’s outcomes. The small number of respondents who had their mothers in prison, restricted us from comparison with those who had their fathers in prison. The possibility to stay in contact with the incarcerated parent has also been highlighted as an important aspect of how children cope with parental incarceration. In this study, no information was given about whether and how contact between parent and child was maintained during the time of incarceration. This could greatly influence the outcome in the children’s lives. Finally, the collected data are retrospective, relying on the participants’ ability to correctly remember life events during their childhood and adolescence. Memory limitations may restrict the participants’ ability to correctly report past events, while their experiences as young adults should be more reliably described.

The complexity of life circumstances

Even if there are significant connections between having a parent in prison and children’s relationships and well-being during childhood and young adulthood, it is important not to oversimplify them. The results in this study are based on average outcomes, which is important to keep in mind when interpreting the results. The impact of a parent’s incarceration on different aspects of a child’s life is a complex issue, and one can assume that contextual factors exert great influence. Having a parent in prison is not the sole causal factor for relationships and well-being. Other important circumstances, such as parents’ criminality, time of parents’ incarceration, prior health, and child behavior were not controlled for. Such factors could mediate the relation between outcomes. Circumstances in the children’s lives before the incarceration, such as a strained household economy, child abuse, drug or alcohol use within the family, or the child’s prior health problems, could also explain negative outcomes for children, in addition to the imprisonment of the parent. Finally, for some children, parents’ imprisonment might be a welcome relief from a destructive family. Parental incarceration is probably one of several contributors to poor parenting and/or a disadvantaged childhood overall.

Implications for practice

The potentially negative aspects of having a parent in prison are supported in this study, highlighting the importance for social and child-protection services, as well as the courts and the prison services, of paying special attention to these children. Children with a parent in prison seem to be a vulnerable group in many respects, with a tangible risk of encountering difficulties in different areas of their lives. However, intervention strategies aiming to support these children are few and not well studied within research. Social and child-protection workers could see parental imprisonment as a good reason to investigate these children’s overall situation in order to offer support in a broader sense. These families are often disadvantaged in other respects, and a parent’s imprisonment could serve as a way in to offer support to disadvantaged families. Children experiencing a parent’s imprisonment live in very different circumstances, and one may assume that contextual factors, in general, but also in relation to the incarceration, influence children’s lives greatly. For social- and child-protection services, this underlines the importance of investigating surrounding factors that can influence how children react to the parent’s incarceration, as well as supporting and strengthening positive factors in the child’s school, at home and in other contexts.

Longitudinal research on children and young adults who had a parent in prison, involving also in-depth interviews with them, could yield further knowledge about the impact of parental imprisonment during childhood, as well as the impact of support.
References


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