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PRIOR PARENTAL INCARCERATION AND THE IMPACT TOWARDS ATTITUDES
ABOUT LAW ENFORCEMENT AS ADULTS

by

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Abstract

The number of incarcerations has been climbing drastically, especially in the United States. A forgotten minority which remains understudied is those children of incarcerated individuals. Many studies have found parental separation to be associated with problematic behavior in children. However, little to no information is known on the attitudes of offspring of incarcerated people toward law enforcement and the police. The current study examined just this, researching children of incarcerated parents' attitudes towards legitimacy and confidence in the police during adulthood. Participants ($N = 55$) were undergraduate students at a small university who gained extra credit for voluntary participation. The results of this study found significant effects caused by parental incarceration as a child to lead to a rise in negative attitudes towards law enforcement, both in confidence as well as legitimacy in the police.

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Prior Parental Incarceration and the Impact Towards Attitudes About Law Enforcement as Adults

Throughout the United States, over one third of minor children will celebrate their 18th birthdays before their parents are released from prison (Akesson et al., 2012; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Within 10 years, there was a 134% rise in total prisoners from 1980 to 1990, with that number climbing to over 770,000 in the United States (Gabel, 1992). From 1990 to 2006, however, this rise in incarceration has reached over 500% (Akesson et al., 2012; Bernstein, 2005; Cohen, 2006). By 2007, the United States prison population had increased more rapidly than the United States residential population. (Akesson et al., 2012; West & Sabol, 2008). The United States even leads the world with more incarcerations per capita than any other country. (Akesson et al., 2012; Cohen, 2006; Harrison & Beck, 2005).

While the prison population grows, so does that of the children of incarcerated parents, a forgotten minority. By 2007, 2.3% of the U.S. minor residential population were children of incarcerated parents. This number grew by 79% between 1991 and 2007 (Akesson et al., 2012), with an estimated total of 1.7 million children who have incarcerated parents (Akesson et al., 2012; Huebner & Gustafson, 2007; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Of these 1.7 million children, 1,370,400 of these children are minors. (Maruschak et al., 2021). In fact, nearly half of prisoners in state prison, 47%, and *more than* half of federal prisoners, 57%, reported having at least one minor child. It is also reported that approximately 71% of these children are under the age of nine (Akesson et al., 2012).

Consistent with adult incarcerations, many of these children often fall prey to the prison systems, as the loss of parents due to incarcerations can have detrimental effects. One out of

every 25 white children who were born in 1990 had a parent who was imprisoned by the time the child reached age 14; however, one out of every *four* Black children faced this same adversity (Akesson et al., 2012; Wildeman, 2009). Because racial inequality still exists within these prison systems, this effect is passed down to their next generation. Black individuals are six times more likely to be incarcerated compared to whites, Hispanics being three times as likely (Akesson et al., 2012; Cohen, 2006). While these minority groups comprise of only 25% of the U.S. population, Black and Hispanic individuals constitute 80% of incarcerated individuals (Akesson et al., 2012; Drucker, 2005). As more minorities are incarcerated, more minority children are also victimized (Akesson et al., 2012; Wildeman, 2009).

With so many minor children growing up with either one or no parents due to imprisonment, many of these children will face serious risk factors. Some of these risk factors include but are not limited to disruption of parent/child bonds, aggression, poor academic performance, mental health issues, substance abuse, and delinquency (Akesson et al., 2012). Many studies have found parental separation to be associated with problematic behavior in children (Burkhead & Fritsch, 1981). When assessing the behavior of children with incarcerated parents, 20% had deterioration in their behaviors which can be directly linked to paternal incarceration.

Teachers reported that children of imprisoned parents were rated below average on social and psychological parameters when compared to the control group (Gabel, 1992). When assessing the reactions of children who experienced parental loss due to incarceration, 40% of the families had emotional and interactional problems, while 20% of these families had experienced behavioral problems with their children (Gabel, 1992).

When asking the incarcerated parents themselves about the behavioral reactions of their children, 67% of inmates reported their children have had behavioral problems since their incarceration that they did not have before. Both male and female inmates had reported exactly the same number of problems per child, the only difference being in the types of problems reported (Gabel, 1992).

Reported in many studies, the sex of the absent parent was found to be correlated with the type of behavior manifested. Absence of the father included behaviors noted as “acting-out,” with absence of the mother included behaviors noted as “acting-in” (Burkhead & Fritsch, 1981). When paternal absence is reported, fathers often experience their children demonstrating hostile behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse, truancy, running away from home, discipline problems, and delinquency. When maternal absence is reported, mothers often experience their children showing signs of withdrawal, acting “babyish,” an increase in fearfulness, poor school performance, excessive crying, and nightmares (Gabel, 1992). These areas of behavioral issues also correspond with those maternal and paternal areas of traditional style child rearing and raising.

Disruption of the parent/child relationship was found to have been linked to delinquency and even with official contact with the criminal justice system. It is even suggested that children of incarcerated parents were significantly more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system (Huebner & Gustafson, 2007). It was also shown that as many as 59% of boys with a convicted parent were convicted themselves up to the age of 32 years old (Boswell, 2002). Conviction of parents, especially at a very young age, can be seen as a form of neglect in most cases, even if unintentional. Many studies have linked neglected children to having higher rates for adult criminality than compared to the control group (Widom, 1989; Nikulina et al., 2011).

Childhood neglect remains a significant predictor for delinquency and criminal behavior, overall school performance, language and reading abilities, and even drop-out rates (Nikulina et.al, 2011).

With neglect being the most common type of childhood maltreatment, accounting for 59% of cases reported to the Child Protective Services in the United States (Nikulina et al., 2011; US Department, 2009), childhood neglect is understudied compared to other types of childhood maltreatment (Nikulina et al., 2011; Wolock & Horowitz, 1984). Even the Library of Congress had a section for Child Abuse but not for Child Neglect (Wolock & Horowitz, 1984), thus calling for the name, the “neglect of neglect” (Nikulina et al., 2011; Wolock & Horowitz, 1984).

Past research has shown that there is little information about the adult status of these neglected children (Nikulina et al., 2011; Trickett & McBride-Chang, 1995); however, one study from 1996 reported that neglected children as adults score lower on IQ tests and reading abilities, and were also at higher risks for prostitution, delinquency, and violent behavior (Maxfield & Widom, 1996; Nikulina et al., 2011; Widom & Kuhns, 1996).

While a lot of families try to stay connected to their incarcerated family members, the strict rules of prisons do not make it easy. It is one of the roles of the Prison Services to ensure that the socially harmful effects of an inmate’s removal from normal life are as far as possible minimized, and that contacts with the outside world are maintained (Boswell, 2002). Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, drafted by the United Nations in 1989, Article 9, Section 1 states that a child shall not be separated from their parents against their will unless in the best interest of the child, such examples include instances of abuse or neglect by the parents. Article 19, Section 1 states that the states shall take all necessary steps to protect children from neglect,

abuse, and maltreatment (United Nations, 1989). While these statements may sound like they are in the best interest of the child, law enforcement is knowingly separating children from their parents, as well as making it increasingly difficult to maintain contact between them due to such strict visitation rules.

In fact, many children experienced mixed feelings about the arrangements given to them when visiting their fathers in prison. These children also commented that they have felt sad and distressed, even going into detail about the negative impacts this has had on their lives (Boswell, 2002). Many children will experience bullying at school because of social stigmatism, ostracization, and even the financial hardships their family has experienced since their father was incarcerated (Boswell, 2002). The social stigma on families and children often elicits strong feelings of shame and anger within the family or associates of the inmates. Many parents will even carefully hide information regarding their spouse's incarceration status, even from close family members (Huebner & Gustafson, 2007). Studies have even examined if the tendency to behave in certain ways was related to whether or not the children knew if this parental separation was caused by incarceration. The findings suggested that parental separation due to imprisonment is especially difficult for children if they know the whereabouts of their parents. (Burkhead & Fritsch, 1981). Keeping these kinds of secrets, especially from the children of the incarcerated parents, can further isolate families from support structures, weaken family bonds, and increase familial stress; however, revealing the secrets exposes children to ostracism and discrimination, resulting in an array of other issues (Huebner & Gustafson, 2007).

So many issues surrounding parental incarceration can be linked to delinquency, adult criminality, and other involvements with the criminal justice system (Murray, 2005), but yet little research is conducted surrounding these issues. While there have been studies conducted to show

the likelihood of criminal activity in adulthood after experiencing parental separation due to incarceration, no research has been conducted to show these same individuals and their confidence in law enforcement. In a study conducted to test if peer delinquency would be a strong predictor for negative attitudes towards the police, it was found that peer delinquency was a significant predictor in negative attitudes toward the police, as well as negative attitudes about the police being a strong (but not significant) predictor for delinquency (Walters, 2019).

As stated, these adverse childhoods are well researched and are shown to have a strong impact on behavior and attitudes as children and even as adults. Much is now known about parental incarceration and the effects it has on childhood behavior and even these behaviors being portrayed into adulthood. However, little to no information is known on the attitudes of offspring of incarcerated people toward law enforcement and the police. The current study will examine if parental incarceration influences attitudes about the legitimacy of and confidence in the police in adults. It is hypothesized that there will be a significant group difference between those individuals whose parents were incarcerated as a child and those whose parents were not, in causing more negative attitudes towards confidence and legitimacy in law enforcement.

Method

Participants

The participants of this survey were undergraduate students at a small university. The survey was distributed to students for voluntary participation. This study was approved by the review board of the university before gathering any participants and all participants were treated in accordance with the ethical guidelines. Since consent to participate was obtained, participants were able to begin the survey.

Participants of this survey ($N = 55$) self-identified their demographics at the start of the survey. Participants varied in age and were between the ages of 18 and 39 ($M = 20.29$, $SD = 3.12$). Given the nature of the all-women's college, 83% of participants were female, 15% identified as nonbinary or a third gender, and 2% chose not to state their gender. For race/ethnicity, 62% identified as White or European American, 11% were Hispanic or Latino, 11% were Black or African American, 9% were Asian, and 6% identified as other or two or more races. All 55 participants signed the informed consent form before the study and were properly debriefed when the study concluded.

Materials

The survey consists of a total of 24 questions, which include those pertaining to demographics.

Adverse Childhood Experiences Measure (ACEM)

Questions were derived from multiple scales, including the Adverse Childhood Experiences Measure (ACEM; Kim et al., 2020), which has multiple questions pertaining to adverse childhood experiences. This measure was developed to assess the exposure to multiple indicators of adverse childhood experiences, such as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, as well as parental divorce. This instrument was designed for a study conducted with a nationally representative sample of adolescents and their parents. While there are multiple items on this measure, only two were utilized for the purpose of this study. These are pertaining to the participants' mother and father's incarceration status, in which the participant will be able to indicate *yes* or *no* in their response. No reliability or validity results were reported for these items.

Legitimacy in Policing Questionnaire (LPQ)

The second measure in which this study utilizes is the Legitimacy in Policing Questionnaire (LPQ; Gua, 2015), which was developed to measure perceptions of police legitimacy, legal cynicism, procedural justice, and obligations to obey. A total of 17 items were administered to a sample of participants who had face-to-face contact with their local law enforcement. For the purpose of this study, only 12 out of the 17 questions were utilized. The questions not utilized were pertaining to individual police interactions and were not useful for the purpose of this study, as the survey is examining generalized attitudes about the police. Previous confirmatory factor analysis found that these four factors (legitimacy, cynicism, procedural justice, and obligation to obey) fit the data well. Convergent validity was present, as was discriminant validity, as shown by the modestly sized between-factor correlations. This questionnaire was given as a four-point Likert scale, in which participants indicated their level of agreeability from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. A sample question from this questionnaire includes “Indicate the degree in which you agree or disagree with the following statements,” and “police protect people’s basic rights.” Higher scores on this scale correspond with attitudes of less legitimacy towards the police.

Confidence in Police Index (CPI)

The final measure utilized is the Confidence in Police Index (CPI Ren et al., 2005), which was developed in the context of a study examining the linkage between police performance and confidence in police. This measure includes seven items, asking respondents about their beliefs regarding certain qualities of police officers. All seven questions were utilized for the purpose of this study. The Cronbach alpha for the scale in a sample of middle-sized city residents and volunteers was .68. This index was also represented by a Likert scale, using five points ranging

from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, with the option to choose *neither agree nor disagree*.

A sample question from this index includes “how much do you believe that police officers:” and “work with citizens together in solving their problems.” Higher scores on this scale correspond with lower confidence ratings in the police.

Procedure

Data were collected across a three-month period at the will of the participants. A total of 71 responses were collected via Qualtrics; however, 17 responses were removed for extreme incompleteness by the researcher. Data from Qualtrics was transferred and statistically analyzed using SPSS. Reliability statistics were run to determine the Cronbach’s Alpha of the measures used. It was found that for this specific study, which was surveying attitudes about the police, some questions were not useful for this research. Extremely low Pearson r correlations between specific items and the total scale score were found for question numbers five, six, seven, eight, and nine from the LPQ scale. These questions were measuring cynicism instead of legitimacy in police officers, which is why they correlated so poorly. The Cronbach’s Alpha with these questions included was .563, and with the questions omitted the new Cronbach’s Alpha was .838. These questions were removed from the study in order to display the most reliable results. A complete list of survey questions which were utilized, including those omitted, is listed in Appendix A.

Incarceration status of parents of the participants can be operationally defined as a score higher than one on the Adverse Childhood Experiences Measure. The Legitimacy in Policing Questionnaire was documented where a lower score (one through four) was associated with a lesser amount of belief in legitimacy towards policing. In the Confidence in Police Index, a

higher score (one through five) indicated a lower confidence in police. All questions from these three measures can be found in Appendix A.

Both scales were found to have a normal distribution, so a Pearson r correlational test was used to correlate the two measures of attitudes towards police. Groups were compared using descriptive statistics and independent t tests. An additional analysis examining racial/ethnic differences was also conducted.

Results

The Pearson r correlation between the LPQ and the CPI was positive and statistically significant $r(53) = .75, p < .001$. This means that as the attitudes towards the legitimacy of the police decrease, so does confidence in the police. As reported for the Legitimacy in Policing Questionnaire, for those participants whose biological parents were incarcerated ($M = 16, SD = 2.75$), there was a significant effect from prior parental incarcerations $t(51) = -2.21, p = .03$, than compared to those whose parents were not ($M = 20.19, SD = 4.5$). In the case of the Confidence in Policing Index, for those participants whose biological parents were incarcerated ($M = 21.83, SD = 5.38$), there was also a significant effect in confidence towards police $t(53) = -2.48, p = .01$, compared to those whose parents had never been incarcerated ($M = 27.36, SD = 5.11$). The results of this study found that both hypotheses stated in the beginning of this research were supported. As reported by the Independent Samples T-test, the effect of parental incarceration on attitudes towards law enforcement measured in both variables was statistically significant.

A separate descriptive analysis was run to test if race and ethnicity had an effect on confidence and legitimacy in policing. While White or European American individuals produced higher averages for negative attitudes towards confidence in policing ($M = 27.85, SD = 4.89$), as

well as for legitimacy in police ($M = 20.42$, $SD = 4.96$), the number of individuals who identified as this race or ethnicity ($N = 34$) was much higher than compared to Black or African American individuals. For a more accurate reference, the same number of individuals identified as Asian descent ($N = 6$) as who identified as Black or African American. Asian individuals scored a much lower average for negative attitudes toward confidence ($M = 23.5$, $SD = 5.0$) and legitimacy ($M = 18.3$, $SD = 2.5$) than compared to all other races.

Discussion

The study's results found significant effects caused by parental incarceration as a child to lead to a rise in negative attitudes towards law enforcement, both in confidence and belief in the legitimacy of the police. This rise in negative attitudes is typical of children living with adverse childhoods. As stated earlier, many children who endure the loss of a parental figure due to incarceration will often experience behaviors related to a distrust or even defiance of authority. This was known as “acting out” behaviors, which were often exhibited in children who experienced a loss of their paternal parent due to incarceration (Burkhead & Fritsch, 1981). These types of behaviors, along with many others which are exhibited throughout childhood, can persevere through to adulthood, especially after enduring the traumatic experiences which are related to parental incarcerations. Many children may also carry generational trauma associated with the loss of their parents, influencing them to demonstrate more of these learned behaviors.

These limitations extend to include the general sample size of this study as well, as this survey was conducted at a small, private, all women's university. The sample, while limited in diversity, was also a sample of convenience. A separate limitation may also include an inability to determine the magnitude of these effects of parental incarcerations on children. For example,

these children of incarcerated parents have the potential for many more negative attitudes towards authority figures in general, not limited to law enforcement. The magnitude of behavioral, psychological, and emotional effects caused by parental incarcerations is understudied. A separate study conducting research on these topics may be interesting.

While significant results were found in this research, further research should include a more diverse and larger sample of individuals. It would also be interesting to examine alternate factors that could influence an individual to have negative attitudes towards law enforcement personnel. These factors include but are certainly not limited to race, age, gender, environmental effects, as well as other adverse childhood experiences aside from parental incarcerations.

While much of the psychological research is not centered around childhood neglect due to parental incarceration, little to no research has shown the effects of this on attitudes towards law enforcement personnel. This study found that there were significant effects on negative attitudes towards legitimacy as well as confidence in the police after having a biological parent incarcerated. Many factors could have biased these results and more research is needed for the study of these topics as well as their counterparts.

Appendix A

LPQ:

Indicate the degree in which you agree or disagree with the following statements.
Police protect people's basic rights.
Police are generally honest.
Most officers do their jobs well.
Police can be trusted to do what's right for my neighborhood. (omitted)
Laws protect everyone equally. (omitted)
People with money and power can get away with anything. (omitted)
Politicians only care about getting re-elected. (omitted)
Anyone can get ahead if they try hard enough. (omitted)
Powerful people use laws to disadvantage powerless people. (omitted)
When the police issue a formal order, you should do what they say even if you disagree with it.
You should accept officers' decisions even if you think they're wrong.
It would be hard to justify disobeying a police officer.

Responses recorded on a 4-point scale (Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree, Strongly Disagree).

CPI:

How much do you believe that police officers:
are usually fair
are usually courteous
are usually honest
are usually not intimidating
work with citizens together in solving problems
treat all citizens equally in general
show concern when asked questions

Responses recorded on a 5-point scale (Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Strongly Disagree).

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