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INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

An attachment perspective on incarcerated parents and their children

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The United States now incarcerates more people than any other country in the world (Pew Charitable Trust, 2008), and most of these incarcerated individuals have one or more children 18 years of age or younger (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Although the actual number is not known because the information is not systematically collected by jails, prisons, schools, child welfare agencies, or other organizations or institutions, a conservative estimate is that more than three million children are affected (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Western & Wildeman, 2009). In editing this special issue we had two major goals: (1) to introduce the many issues raised by parental incarceration to readers already grounded in attachment theory and research and (2) to highlight the importance of an attachment perspective to those who study and work with incarcerated parents. The contributors to this special issue present conceptual and empirical articles focusing on attachment issues related to incarcerated parents and their children. This introduction provides an overview of these contributions.

Keywords: attachment; incarceration; parents; interventions

Introduction

The United States now incarcerates more people than any other country in the world (Pew Charitable Trust, 2008). More than 1 in 100 adults are in jail or prison in the US, including 1 in 30 men between the ages of 20 and 34 years. Sadly, the majority of incarcerated individuals have one or more children 18 years of age or younger (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), which means that an estimated 1.7 million American children have a parent incarcerated in a state or federal prison in the US (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Millions of additional children have a parent in a local jail (Western & Wildeman, 2009). The actual number of affected children is not known, however, because this information is not systematically collected by jails, prisons, schools, child welfare agencies, or other organizations or institutions.

Incarceration rates rose dramatically in the US during the final decades of the 20th century, most likely because of policies designed to punish drug offenders (Phillips, in press). These policies resulted in an unprecedented reliance on incarceration as a method of control, with racial, educational, and age disparities in incarceration rates resulting in a concentration of incarceration among less advantaged individuals, families, and communities (Western & Wildeman, 2009).

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For example, Black children are 7.5 times more likely to experience the incarceration of a parent than White children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Most affected children live in poverty, and many experience risks such as changes in caregivers, frequent moves, parental substance abuse, parental mental health problems, exposure to violence, and maltreatment (e.g., Phillips, Burns, Wagner, & Barth, 2004).

These statistics suggest that a growing number of children are presented with unique challenges related to having an incarcerated parent, including disruptions in attachment relationships that often result from separation, loss of contact, and alterations in quantity and quality of interactions and other forms of communication with parents (Poehlmann, 2005). Because of these problems, we have created this special issue of *Attachment & Human Development* that focuses on the intersection of parental incarceration, attachment theory, and intervention research. In editing this special issue we had two major goals: (1) to introduce the many issues raised by parental incarceration to readers already grounded in attachment theory and research and (2) to highlight the importance of an attachment perspective to those who study and work with incarcerated parents.

This special issue contains conceptual and empirical articles focusing on attachment issues related to incarcerated parents and their children. In Murray and Murray's (2010, pp. 289–309) article, the authors provide a broad conceptual model for thinking about the determinants of child outcomes when a parent is or has been incarcerated, including child and adolescent psychopathology and delinquent behavior. Their analysis considers not only the issue of disruptions in child–parent attachment, but also the many contextual variables and processes associated with both parental incarceration and troubling child outcomes (e.g., poverty, rundown neighborhoods, parental psychopathology, drug and alcohol abuse, poor parenting even well before the incarceration, and unstable caregiving and schooling arrangements during incarceration). The article by Makariev and Shaver (2010, pp. 311–331) summarizes attachment concepts and intervention strategies that might be used with children affected by parental incarceration and their parents and other caregivers.

The articles by Cassidy et al. (2010, pp. 333–353), Borelli, Goshin, Joestl, Clark, and Byrne (2010, pp. 355–374), and Byrne, Goshin, and Joestl (2010, pp. 375–393) describe intervention studies involving incarcerated women and their newborn infants. The interventions were motivated, at least in part, by attachment theory and research. In the Cassidy et al. study, pregnant, nonviolent offenders with a history of substance abuse participated in an extensive intervention within a jail-diversion program that included the Circle of Security Perinatal Protocol (Cooper, Hoffman, & Powell, 2003), an intervention designed to improve parental caregiving and foster secure infant–parent attachment. Although there was no incarcerated non-treatment control group, the resulting levels of maternal sensitivity were similar to those in a community comparison group, and the rate of infant attachment security at 12 months was similar to that typically found in low-risk community samples. The Borelli et al. and the Byrne et al. reports are based on a single intervention study that included incarcerated women who were housed with their newborn infants in a special prison nursery. These reports examine links between mothers' attachment and (1) a variety of aspects of maternal psychosocial functioning (Borelli et al.) and (2) infant attachment (Byrne et al.).

In their article, Shlafer and Poehlmann (2010, pp. 395–415) describe a study of 4–15-year-old children with incarcerated parents. Interviews were conducted with the

children and their caregivers (usually the children's mothers) over a period of six months when the children were participating in a mentoring program for children of incarcerated parents. Through qualitative analysis of interviews and statistical analyses of quantitative measures, Shlafer and Poehlmann show the complexity of children's situations, including issues related to ongoing contact with the incarcerated parent.

Finally, Bretherton (2010, pp. 417–428) comments on these six articles in her discussion, noting the importance of this body of work for attachment researchers, as well as its usefulness for those working with incarcerated parents and their children. Bretherton outlines the challenges of conducting developmental and intervention research related to these individuals, but also the benefits for theory and for the well being of children and families. She also urges researchers to become activists in this policy domain.

Our hope is that this special issue will stimulate further theorizing, research, and intervention for children and families affected by parental incarceration. As the number of people affected by incarceration continues to grow, social workers, psychologists, educators, attorneys, corrections personnel, and other professionals are increasingly likely to encounter individuals and families affected by parental incarceration. Understanding attachment theory and research as it pertains to parental incarceration will help these differently situated professionals, with their varying perspectives, appreciate the implications of relationship processes that occur in affected families. It will also provide them with new ideas about how to help children, parents, and caregivers grapple with the multiple challenges they face. Moreover, for researchers and theorists who focus on understanding human attachment, examination of incarcerated adults and their children provides a window into basic processes of attachment, separation, and loss. It is noteworthy that some of the earliest observations of John Bowlby, the originator of attachment theory, focused on “forty-four juvenile thieves” and the attachment-related aspects of their lives. Bowlby's theoretical heirs have the opportunity to carry that initial project forward.

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