

Adolescents with Incarcerated Parents: Toward Developmentally Informed Research and Practice



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Abstract A substantial portion of the millions of American children who have experienced parental incarceration are adolescents. Research on the intergenerational consequences of parental incarceration has largely focused, however, on either pre-adolescent samples or aggregated across childhood and adolescence or adolescence and young adulthood. The result is that we know comparatively little about how parental incarceration affects well-being during this unique, critical juncture of the lifespan. Normative developmental changes in physical, cognitive, and psychosocial development can influence how adolescents think about, cope with, and respond to the experience of parental incarceration. These changes also have implications for the kinds of research questions we ask and how we develop and implement intervention programs. This chapter provides an overview of the major biological, cognitive, and psychosocial transitions that occur during adolescence and reviews existing studies on adolescents with incarcerated parents. We also provide recommendations for developmentally informed research and practice with this population.

Keywords Parental incarceration · Parents in prison · Adolescent development · Developmentally informed practice

More than five million American youth are estimated to have experienced the incarceration of a residential parent (Murphey & Cooper, 2015), a substantial portion of whom are adolescents. Analysis of data from national inmate surveys suggest that between 42.5% and 50.4% percent of minor children reported by individuals in state and federal correctional facilities are between the ages of 10 and 17 (Glaze &

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Maruschak, 2008; Mumola, 2000). Data from the National Survey of Children's Health, a representative sample of children under the age of 18 in the United States, further suggest that 8% of all US children between the ages of 12 and 17 have lived with a parent who has been to jail or prison (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). The majority of youth experience their fathers' incarceration; however the incidence of maternal imprisonment has increased at a dramatic pace with growing numbers of youth experiencing maternal and dual (i.e., maternal and paternal) incarceration by young adulthood (Wildeman & Turney, 2014). Even these conservative estimates, which either don't reflect children with parents incarcerated in local jails or nonresident parents' contact with the criminal justice system, suggest the wide scope of parental incarceration and underscore the importance of developmentally informed research and practice with adolescents.

Although a substantial portion of the millions of American children who experience parental incarceration are adolescents, research on the intergenerational consequences of parental incarceration has largely focused on either pre-adolescent samples or aggregated across childhood and adolescence or adolescence and young adulthood. The result is that we know comparatively little about the experiences of children with incarcerated parents during adolescence, a critical juncture in the lifespan that is characterized by biological, cognitive, and psychosocial transitions. These changes present unique opportunities for the expression of both risk and resilience and have important implications for how we study and work with adolescents and their families. In this chapter, we provide a brief overview of the fundamental changes that occur during adolescence and review existing work on parental incarceration and adolescent well-being. We also offer recommendations for developmentally informed research and practice with adolescents.

A Primer on Adolescent Development

Adolescence is a critical transitional period in the lifespan that is characterized by major physical, cognitive, and psychosocial changes. Although adolescence is often synonymous with "the teen years" in popular discourse, developmental scientists conceptualize it more broadly as encompassing the time between puberty and assuming adult roles and responsibilities (Dahl et al., 2018; Steinberg, 2014). The chronological boundaries of adolescence have shifted across historical time, with contemporary researchers largely embracing the view that adolescence roughly corresponds to the second decade of life.

The changes of the second decade begin with biological, neurological, and physical processes that set the stage for cognitive and psychosocial transitions (Dahl et al., 2018). Becoming capable of reproduction is one of the biological hallmarks of adolescence, but sexual maturation is just one component of a much larger set of physical changes that occur. The hormonal changes of puberty that begin in the neuroendocrine system stimulate the development of primary and secondary sex characteristics as well as changes in height, muscle mass, body fat, and sleep

patterns. These physical developments can have important implications for how adolescents think and feel about themselves, especially when they occur early or late relative to peers. Puberty typically begins around age 10 for girls and age 12 for boys (Dahl et al., 2018), but there is important variability in the onset of puberty, and research suggests that early maturation can be particularly consequential for girls' mental and physical health (Graber, 2013). Timing of pubertal maturation is influenced by a number of factors including exposure to adversities such as economic disadvantage, stress, and father absence (Deardorff et al., 2011), and there is also evidence that the effects of pubertal timing on adolescent well-being are amplified by family and neighborhood disadvantage (Ge et al., 2002). Pubertal development and timing are therefore essential considerations in studies of mental health and distress among adolescents who have experienced parental incarceration. Parallel literatures examining adolescent development and father absence further highlight the need to embed adolescent development in broader contexts of family and community life. For example, there is evidence that father absence during early childhood appeared to connect with the early timing of menarche for adolescent girls; however, this relationship was fully mediated by maternal depression and financial problems (Culpin et al., 2014). Such a finding raises interesting questions about the timing of parental incarceration and adolescent development as well as the role of family-level instabilities in mediating these effects.

Puberty-related hormones also contribute to changes in the brain during adolescence (Goddings et al., 2019). Although the brain reaches its full size by age 10, major changes in brain structure, function, and connectivity occur throughout adolescence (Dahl et al., 2018; Steinberg, 2014). Particular attention has been paid to the nature and consequences of changes in the prefrontal cortex, the region of the brain that is particularly important for sophisticated thinking abilities such as planning, weighing risks and rewards, and controlling impulses. Neural changes that occur in the prefrontal cortex during adolescence enhance how the brain processes and integrates information, and there is also evidence of gradual, increased connectivity in regions of the brain responsible for processing emotional and social stimuli. The brain is thought to be particularly "plastic" or sensitive to experience during adolescence, meaning that brain development not only shapes adolescents' experiences of rewards, relationships, and regulation but is also shaped by them (Steinberg, 2014). This also means that acute and chronic stressors related to parental incarceration such as economic and residential stability, changes in family relationships, and trauma related to witnessing a parent's arrest may alter brain structure and function in ways that could have significant consequences for well-being. Importantly, however, sensitivity to experience also applies to positive and enriching experiences, making adolescence an especially crucial time to implement interventions designed to promote developmental assets and healthy family relationships.

Changes in brain structure, function, and connectivity are accompanied by significant developments in cognitive, emotional, and self-regulatory abilities. These changes culminate in the ability to "adaptively pursue new goals and priorities that can be increasingly abstract and extend far into the future" (Dahl et al., 2018; p. 442). The emergence of more sophisticated ways of thinking such as the capacity

to think abstractly and hypothetically also contributes to changes in how adolescents view themselves and their futures. Identity work has long been viewed as one of the main psychosocial tasks of adolescence (Erikson, 1968), and identity processes are closely tied to the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which young people develop (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996). The explicit and implicit messages that adolescents receive about their future possibilities often inform how they construct and work toward images of themselves in the future (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). Parental incarceration may shape these “possible selves” and strategies in ways that can influence academic and behavioral outcomes. Youth may view incarceration as a likely outcome or “feared possible self,” especially if they live in households or neighborhoods with high concentrations of incarceration. In this vein, youth with incarcerated parents may come to endorse or internalize identities that are focused on antisocial behavior which, in turn, increases their risk for delinquent behavior (c.f., Finkeldey et al., 2020).

Changes in cognitive, emotional, and self-regulatory abilities may also change how adolescents relate to others. Relationships with parents and friends evolve in both quantitative and qualitative ways during adolescence, and adolescents’ intimacy and affiliation needs are increasingly also met through romantic relationships. Adolescents begin to spend more time with friends and less time with family (Larson et al., 1996); start to value abstract concepts such as trust, closeness, and intimacy more in their friendships (Smetana & Villalobos, 2009); and increasingly look to friends rather than parents for social support (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). These changes likely have important implications for youth disclosure decisions in the context of parental incarceration and may also influence who they look to for support surrounding parental incarceration.

Parents continue, however, to be critical influences in their children’s lives throughout adolescence. Structural dimensions of parenting such as monitoring and supervision as well as more affective dimensions such as warmth, support, and responsiveness serve a number of protective functions for adolescents (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Researchers have also increasingly embraced the notion that normative developmental changes in parent-child relationships can present both challenges and opportunities (Suleiman & Dahl, 2019). Challenges may potentially be magnified in the context of parental incarceration because of physical or psychological distance between adolescents and their parents, but this phase of the lifespan also provides new opportunities to repair and rebuild relationships that may have been damaged prior to or because of parental incarceration.

In sum, adolescent development is characterized by a variety of physical, cognitive, and psychosocial changes. These changes interact to transform adolescents’ inner worlds and their relationships with others and have important implications for what, when, and how we study adolescent development in the context of parental incarceration. Although these changes were once thought to usher in a period of inevitable, universal turmoil, developmental scientists have long since rejected this “storm and stress” characterization (Arnett, 1999). Rather, contemporary scholars view adolescence as a period of transformation and opportunity that should also be reflected in research on adolescents with incarcerated parents.

Research on Adolescents with Incarcerated Parents

Although approximately half of children with incarcerated parents are adolescents, it is only recently that researchers have focused specifically on child well-being during adolescence (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). Recent scholarship has identified a host of psychological, social, and economic harms to children that stem from parental incarceration and may proliferate into early adulthood (e.g., Foster & Hagan, 2015; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014). The fact that harms connected to the experience of parental incarceration during childhood may be long-lasting has contributed to greater efforts on the part of social scientists to understand the implications of a parent's confinement for adolescent adjustment (Mears & Siennick, 2016). As we outline below, existing research related to the second decade of life has focused on links between parental incarceration during childhood and adolescent emotional and behavioral problems, school-related outcomes, and sexual and physical health. A handful of studies, mostly qualitative in nature, have also focused on coping and more positive indicators of well-being.

Internalizing and Externalizing Problems

The majority of research on adolescents with incarcerated parents has focused on internalizing and externalizing problems. Internalizing problems encompass inwardly directed manifestations of distress such as depression or withdrawal, whereas externalizing problems reflect outwardly directed manifestations of distress such as aggression, antisocial behavior, and substance use. Although some studies suggest that parental incarceration heightens risk for problems such as depression, anxiety, and self-injurious behaviors (Davis & Shlafer, 2017a; Swisher & Shaw-Smith, 2015), other studies suggest that differences between adolescents with histories of parental incarceration and those without are not statistically significant after controlling for other adversities (Boch et al., 2019; Murray et al., 2012; Thurman et al., 2018). A similar pattern has emerged for externalizing problems. Several studies provide evidence that incarceration heightens risk for behavior problems and serious delinquency (e.g., Murray et al., 2012; Ruhland et al., 2020; Swisher & Shaw-Smith, 2015) and that this association may increase over time (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011). Other studies suggest, however, that parental incarceration may be a marker of accumulated adversity but not a mechanism of risk (Boch et al., 2019; Chavira et al., 2018; Porter & King, 2015).

One explanation for these seemingly divergent findings is that between-group comparisons of youth with incarcerated parents and those without may mask important within-group variability. The effects of parental incarceration during adolescence may depend, for example, on the age at which parents were incarcerated, how long they were incarcerated, and whether incarceration was temporally proximal or distal to the outcomes being assessed. Indeed, Kjellstrand and colleagues (Kjellstrand

et al., 2018; Kjellstrand et al., 2020) have found that adolescents with incarcerated parents are at varying degrees of risk for trajectories of internalizing and externalizing problems. Although some adolescents with incarcerated parents may exhibit levels of internalizing and externalizing problems that are cause for concern – either at particular points in time or across adolescence – the majority do not.

Studies on substance use and drug-related problems have generally been more consistent in showing an adverse impact of parental incarceration. Davis and Shlafer (2017b) found that adolescents with currently and formerly incarcerated parents were more likely to experiment with alcohol at an early age, binge drink, and meet criteria for substance abuse or dependence than youth without a history of parental incarceration, with effects being most pronounced for youth with currently incarcerated parents. Studies with older adolescents and emerging adults have also indicated that parental incarceration is associated with increased frequency of substance use and drug-related problems (Kopak & Smith-Ruiz, 2016; Mears & Siennick, 2016), as well as accelerated trajectories of use across the transition from adolescence to young adulthood (Roettger et al., 2010). Although studies have been consistent in showing that parental incarceration increases risk for substance use above and beyond sociodemographic adversities, we know little about the extent to which this reflects ongoing exposure to substance use norms and behaviors or whether it reflects unique risk associated, for example, with efforts to self-medicate negative emotions related to parental incarceration.

School-Based Outcomes

Attention to school-based outcomes is particularly important during adolescence given the vast amount of time that adolescents spend at school and the implications of educational outcomes during adolescence for adult economic and employment security. Two studies suggest that youth with incarcerated parents have more school-related problems than comparison youth including decreased educational engagement and connectedness, lower grades, and more exposure to disciplinary actions than comparison youth that could not be explained by differences in sociodemographic and school-level characteristics (Nichols et al., 2016; Shlafer et al., 2017). Other studies suggest, however, that between-group differences in attention problems and academic performance are not robust to the inclusion of controls for pre-incarceration performance and other adverse childhood experiences (Boch et al., 2019; Murray et al., 2012). In terms of social networks at school, results have been consistent in showing a pattern of social marginalization among youth with incarcerated parents. Specifically, youth with incarcerated parents have friendship networks that are characterized by more disadvantage, more delinquency, and less academic success than comparison youth (Bryan, 2017; Cochran et al., 2018). Finally, the most recent study on this subject suggests that parental incarceration adversely impacts behavioral and disciplinary outcomes in high school above and beyond the impact of other adversities but that effects on grades are largely due to selection (McCauley, 2020).

Sexual and Physical Health

Findings related to sexual and physical health have been consistent in suggesting that youth with incarcerated parents are at an elevated risk for problems in this domain relative to peers, even after adjusting for differences in sociodemographic characteristics. Several studies with different samples have suggested that maternal (Le et al., 2019) and paternal (Nebbitt et al., 2017; Turney & Goldberg, 2019) incarcerations are associated with an increased likelihood of early sexual debut, a finding that may reflect exposure to stress that hastens pubertal maturation and/or leads to sexual activity as a way of meeting needs for affiliation and intimacy. Khan et al. (2018) also found evidence of risk related to sexual health, observing that parental incarceration before age 8 was associated with STI/HIV risk in adolescence for Black youth as well as a modest association between parental incarceration and having multiple sexual partners during adolescence. Intriguingly, parental incarceration before the age of 8 had a stronger impact on these outcomes than incarceration that occurred between the ages of 8 and 17. Work by Hiolski et al. (2019) further indicated that patterns of physical activity, fruit and vegetable consumption, and sleep are also adversely affected by parental incarceration, even after controlling for economic hardship. Given that health risk behaviors are a major cause of morbidity among adolescents (Bennett & Bauman, 2000) and may forebode a variety of health problems later in life, these findings underscore continued investigation and attention to the mechanisms by which parental incarceration may translate into poorer profiles of physical health and well-being.

Coping and Positive Youth Development

Although the majority of research on adolescents with incarcerated parents has been problem-focused (Eddy & Reid, 2003; Shlafer et al., 2019), findings from qualitative and mixed-methods studies have suggested evidence of resilience and positive youth development. These studies suggest that youth often cope with the challenges of parental incarceration in positive, resourceful, and multifaceted ways (Berman & Steinhoff, 2012; Johnson & Easterling, 2015a; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). They also suggest that some youth, particularly older adolescents, manage the stress and negative affect associated with parental incarceration by attempting to exert control in their relationships with parents – and that this gives them a sense of strength and purpose (Johnson & Easterling, 2015a). Work by Johnson et al. (2018) further suggests that even youth who are exhibiting adjustment problems may also display competencies. This finding is broadly consistent with research on positive youth development (Lewin-Bizan et al., 2010) and underscores the importance of conceptualizations of adjustment that encompass both problems and competencies.

Summary

Most existing studies of adolescents have focused on between-group comparisons of youth with incarcerated parents and those without in terms of adverse outcomes. These studies have primarily focused on the effects of parental incarceration before the age of 10 on adolescent outcomes and have largely considered the impact of whether any parent (mother or father) was ever incarcerated during this time frame. Results of these studies have been mixed, with some suggesting that parental incarceration heightens risk for emotional, behavioral, academic, and health-related problems and other studies suggesting that the differences between groups reflect the impact of other adversities. Thus, whereas some studies suggest that parental incarceration may be a mechanism of risk for adolescent development, other studies raise the possibility that it may better be conceptualized as a marker of accumulated adversity or what Giordano and Copp (2015) have called “packages of risk.” Most recently, an emerging body of work has moved away from focusing on between-group differences to identifying variability among youth (Johnson et al., 2018; Kjellstrand et al., 2018, 2020). In the section that follows, we offer recommendations for additional research on within-group variability that is more focused on positive youth development and sensitive to developmental processes.

Developmentally Informed Research with Adolescents

Contemporary adolescent research has been focused on identifying assets and positive youth development, capturing the diversity of adolescent experiences, and explaining how changes across domains of development interrelate and interact to shape the lives of young people (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). Adopting these foci in the literature on adolescents with incarcerated parents has the potential to transform the way we conduct research and advance our understanding of ecological adversity and well-being during this critical phase of the lifespan. We therefore suggest that future research should focus on development in multiple domains and connections between these domains, recognize both challenges and assets, and seek to identify variability in adolescents’ experiences. Specific recommendations are provided below.

Recommendation #1: Focus More on the Nature and Sources of Within-Group Variability

Although between-group comparisons have been a critically important first step in the research on adolescents with incarcerated parents, they often mask important within-group variability and detract from the equally important work of

identifying the nature and sources of heterogeneity among adolescents with incarcerated parents. At the most basic level, this means recognizing that youth with incarcerated parents are a diverse population at varying degrees of risk for problematic outcomes. Moreover, parental incarceration is not equitably distributed, and racial disparities in prison populations extend to children and youth. Black youth are far more likely than White youth to experience the incarceration of a parent and of multiple family members (Wildeman, 2009; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014). The harms that minority youth experience are speculated to stem in part from their inequitable exposure not only to parental and familial incarceration but also other adverse childhood experiences (such as poverty and neighborhood violence) (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). It is essential to acknowledge these racial disparities while also considering within-group variation and sources of resilience in the day-to-day lives of Black youth. For example, strong and close intergenerational relationships with Black youth and their caregivers promote outcomes such as school success and help youth overcome adversity (see Arditti et al., 2020, for a review). A within-group sensibility contributes to a deep consideration of how best to promote adolescent well-being and resilience and contextualizes the lives of youth by attending to their social location and sources of systematic inequality that precede and exacerbate the implications of parental incarceration. Conceptualizing incarceration as a process that unfolds over time rather than a discrete event may also be helpful in illuminating additional sources of variability among youth and helping to reconcile seemingly contradictory findings (e.g., there may be an initial increase in a depression or anxiety that levels off as adolescents and their families adjust and then may resurface during reentry).

Recommendation #2: Integrate Strengths-Based Perspectives

Research on adolescents with incarcerated parents has been, and continues to be, largely problem-focused (Eddy & Reid, 2003; Shlafer et al., 2019). Although it is essential to document the many ways in which mass incarceration harms adolescents and their families, it is also important to challenge deficit-focused perspectives and recognize youth strengths, competencies, and resilience. Although successful adaptation is often operationalized in terms of the absence of problems, resilience researchers have long emphasized the importance of studying the presence of competence in age-salient developmental tasks (Masten, 2014). The nature of competence changes across development and needs to be considered in relation to what a given society, culture, or setting values at a particular point in time for people of a given age group. Examples of competence during adolescence include establishing autonomy while remaining meaningfully connected to others, planning for the future, and completing schooling. Examining these and other adaptive outcomes will advance our ability to document the nature and predictors of resilience.

Recommendation #3: “Zero in” on Regulation and Relationships

The major changes in brain structure, function, and connectivity that occur during adolescence have significant implications for cognitive, emotional, and psychosocial development (Dahl et al., 2018; Steinberg, 2014). Given the sensitivity of the brain to experience during adolescence, investigating how, when, and why parental incarceration affects aspects of brain development and neurocognitive functioning is a critical direction for future research. Self-regulation and relationships are thought to be particularly important foci (Steinberg, 2014), yet these areas have been underexplored in research on adolescents with incarcerated parents. One particularly important direction for future research is to examine how stress, instability, and trauma around parental incarceration affect developing self-regulatory processes during adolescence. It is also essential to devote more attention to investigating the quality and protective potential of adolescents' relationships with parents, caregivers, and/or peers. Resilience scholars have long argued that healthy relationships are essential to resilience in the face of adversity (Luthar & Brown, 2007), yet we know surprisingly little about the nature and quality of adolescents' relationships before, during, and after parental incarceration. Identifying the circumstances under which relationships with peers and family members heighten or mitigate risk would provide important new information for the development of adolescent-focused intervention programs (e.g., when and how to intervene).

Recommendation #4: Investigate Developmentally Relevant Mediators and Moderators

Although attention to mediators and moderators has increased in the more general literature on children with incarcerated parents, few studies have investigated them in relation to adolescent well-being. The results of these studies suggest that youth gender and whether or not children lived with their incarcerated parent function as moderators (Swisher & Shaw-Smith, 2015; Turney & Goldberg, 2019) and also reveal that family instability following incarceration may increase risk for behavior problems which, in turn, leads to problems in other domains of functioning (Turney & Goldberg, 2019). The latter finding suggests that parental incarceration may exacerbate existing adversities and set into motion new chains of events or cascades of adversity that are important to map out in future research.

The conceptual models that have most recently emerged posit that parental incarceration has both direct and indirect effects on child outcomes and that family processes such as parenting and family stability as well as youth emotional experiences play key mediating roles (Arditti, 2016, 2018; Foster & Hagan, 2015). All of these

mechanisms are plausible across infancy, childhood, and adolescence but may differ in nature and kind. For example, parental supervision and monitoring take on special significance during adolescence, and coping strategies may also fluctuate in both productive (e.g., more active and engaged coping) and unproductive (e.g., self-medication) ways. In addition, new mediators may emerge. Future expectations, for example, may be shaped by parental incarceration and also influence academic engagement and young adult outcomes. Neurocognitive processes such as executive function and emotional regulation are also sensitive to adversity during adolescence and may influence later behavioral and academic outcomes. Examples of developmentally relevant moderators that are important to investigate in future research include pubertal development and timing, peer and neighborhood contexts, coping strategies, race, ethnicity, gender, and age. An intersectional approach that acknowledges the social location of adolescents and their families would be particularly helpful in understanding how oppression and privilege shape developmental trajectories within the context of parental incarceration (Poehlmann-Tynan & Arditti, 2018).

Recommendation #5: Integrate Youth Voices and Perspectives

Qualitative studies that capture youth voices and experiences have provided more evidence of competence and adaptive coping than quantitative studies and warrant additional use in the literature on adolescents with incarcerated parents. Continuing to explore youth narratives and meaning-making not only will provide a more complete and nuanced picture of risk, competence, and resilience but may also translate into advantages for young people themselves. For example, youth-based participatory research methods may be especially valuable in that they can empower youth and harness their experiences to create change (e.g., Checkoway et al., 2003). Regardless of the specific type of qualitative method, bringing a “qualitative consciousness” into the study of adolescents’ experiences related to parental imprisonment has great value given the often stigmatizing and prohibitive context of criminal justice involvement. Qualitative methods are particularly apt for studying vulnerable populations (such as justice-involved families; see, e.g., Arditti, 2015) and relevant for honoring the “voices” of adolescent research participants. Giving voice to adolescents confers greater control over their narrative – something that is consistent with the emerging autonomy that is characteristic of this developmental stage (Rich & Ginsburg, 1999). Qualitative methods aimed at eliciting thick description also provide youth with an opportunity to explore their emotions regarding their incarcerated parent, family and social changes, and feelings about their own behaviors, thereby benefitting young people themselves as well as researchers’ understanding of youth meaning-making and adaptation to parental incarceration.

Developmentally Informed Practice with Adolescents

Mobilizing support for adolescents who experience parental incarceration via intervention programs is an important complement to legislative and policy changes designed to reduce incarceration and increase supports to families (Arditti & Johnson, 2020). Given the plasticity of the brain during adolescence, Steinberg (2014) argues that “we must be exceptionally thoughtful and careful about the experiences we give young people as they develop from childhood to adulthood” (p. 22). In particular, it is important that intervention programs are sensitive to changing developmental resources and needs, respectful of adolescents’ desires for both autonomy and connection, and strategically focused not only on reducing risk but also increasing resilience and positive youth development. Conceptualizing adolescence as a time of opportunity and capitalizing on the resources youth can bring to the table are important dimensions as well.

Recommendation #1: Develop and Evaluate Programs That Are Specific to Adolescents

Most existing programs for youth with incarcerated parents are focused on children (Hoffman et al., 2010; Johnston, 2012; Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). Developing programs that specifically serve adolescents – both within and outside of correctional facilities – is critical for ensuring that their unique developmental needs are met and that they are positioned for positive transitions into adulthood. At the most basic level, this means recognizing the breadth and depth of changes that adolescents are undergoing. Adolescents’ brains and bodies are developing, they are thinking about themselves and their worlds in new ways, and they are experiencing changes in relationships with parents, friends, and peers. They may also be more aware of the stigma around parental incarceration and have different needs regarding communication and control in their relationships with their parents (Johnson & Easterling, 2015a). Whereas parents and caregivers may play important gatekeeping roles during childhood, adolescents may want or need more of a say what their relationships with parents look like and when and how they have contact with them. Adolescents may also have more complicated, mixed feelings about parents being in jail and/or coming home than children (Johnson & Easterling, 2015b), in part because of cognitive developments that enable them to think in more complicated, contradictory ways and in part because they may have experienced disappointments or setbacks with parents before. Helping youth to navigate these increasingly complex feelings is vital, as is programming that educates caregivers about the changing developmental landscape and helps youth formulate and enact visions for their futures.

Another component of developmentally informed intervention is situating programs in the settings where adolescents typically spend their time. Shlafer et al.

(2017) suggest, for instance, that schools are particularly important settings for interventions such as peer support groups, tutoring, and mentoring. They also recommend that teachers and administrators are educated in issues surrounding parental incarceration and that they are informed about how to avoid perpetuating harmful assumptions and biased about families whose lives have affected by criminal justice programming. After-school programs and community-based settings such as Boys and Girls Clubs and YMCAs may also be ideal settings for programming, especially to the extent that youth are already spending time in these settings.

Recognizing that there is variability within adolescence in terms of normative developmental changes is also critical for conducting developmentally sensitive interventions. Ten-year-olds are different from 17-year-olds, for example, in a variety of ways. Seventeen-year-olds are likely spending less time with parents, moving more freely and independently in their neighborhoods, engaging in romantic relationships, and thinking about their futures in ways that 10-year-olds are not. Because so many physical, cognitive, and psychosocial changes occur during adolescence, scholars have suggested the value of conceptualizing adolescence as being comprised of a series of phases that roughly correspond to major educational transitions – early adolescence (~10–13), middle adolescence (~14–17), and late adolescence (~18–21) – and these age demarcations may also be useful in developing and targeting intervention programs.

Recommendation #2: Recognize that Adolescents Have Different Needs

A handful of recent studies indicate that there is important variability among adolescents with incarcerated parents and their families. One important implication of these findings is that youth may have varying degrees of need for services and benefit from different types of interventions. Johnson et al. (2018), for instance, observed that some youth were thriving, some were functioning well, some were both struggling and exhibiting competences, and some were exhibiting problems across multiple settings. Youth that are exhibiting difficulties across settings are likely most in need of services because they are already displaying problems, but also because their social ecologies are characterized by more contextual strains and fewer caregiver-level protective factors to offset that risk. Although the vulnerable group and their caregivers may need the most intensive level of services, the other groups may also benefit from supports to help maintain their positive trajectories as they encounter normative developmental challenges during adolescence. Additionally, some youth may need help coping with stigma or trauma around witnessing a parent's arrest, whereas others may require guidance with navigating relationships with parents or reentry. Still other youth may benefit from more universal approaches such as anti-poverty programs and assistance with basic needs (Giordano et al., 2019; Poehlmann-Tynan & Arditti, 2018) – either alone or in conjunction with more targeted interventions.

Recommendation #3: Adopt Positive Youth Development Perspectives and Approaches

In general, interventions with adolescents have focused on preventing or remediating problems rather than promoting positive growth and development (Steinberg, 2014). Given that resilience is not just about the absence of problems but also the presence of competence, it is crucial to implement programs that reflect a positive youth development (PYD) focus. This approach “emphasizes the manifest potentialities rather than the supposed incapacities of young people – including youth from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and those with the most troubled histories” and is focused on “understanding, educating, and engaging children in productive activities rather than correcting, curing, or treating them for maladaptive tendencies” (Damon, 2004; p. 15). PYD-based approaches often emphasize the development of the “5 Cs” – competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (Lerner et al., 2005) – and have proven effective with multiply disadvantaged youth. Including youth voices and lived experiences in conversations around what they need would bolster PYD-based approaches. Just as youth voices have helped transform narratives around parental incarceration, the recognition and inclusion of their perspectives may appreciably enhance both the nature and impact of intervention programs.

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