

Understanding children's resilience to an earlier experience of parental imprisonment

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Outline

- ▶ Why study resilience in prisoners' children?
- ▶ The Families and Imprisonment Research (FAIR) study
- ▶ Findings
 - ▶ Children's difficulties over time
 - ▶ Resilience
 - ▶ Children's self-concept
 - ▶ Coping strategies
 - ▶ Family-level associations

Prisoners' Families: The “Forgotten Victims”

Helen Codd explores the main issues facing prisoners' families and the vital role of voluntary sector groups in supporting them. She examines the reasons for the relatively low priority given to such work by the Probation Service, and considers how it may be able to provide greater assistance to families within existing resource limitations.

Why is resilience a helpful concept in the study of children and families who have experienced parental imprisonment?

- ▶ Earlier studies have identified variation in outcomes of parental imprisonment for prisoners' families.
- ▶ Meta-analyses focus on negative outcomes e.g anti-social behaviour (Murray et al, 2012)
- ▶ Rarely been asked how and why a proportion of children and families cope relatively well with this adverse life event.
- ▶ *Resilience* provides a useful conceptual framework for approaching this question. Analytical salience at both an individual and a family level (e.g. Criss et al., 2015; Masten, 2016, Walsh, 2016).

How are we defining *resilience*?

- ▶ “reduced vulnerability to environmental risk experiences, the overcoming of a stress or adversity or *a relatively good outcome* despite risk experiences” (Rutter, 2012, p. 336).
- ▶ The project is drawing on an *ecological resilience framework* (Ungar, 2012). Brings into vision the political, social, economic and cultural factors.
- ▶ The outcome may be defined in terms of specific achievements or competencies e.g. keeping family going, bringing up children, or by an absence of debilitating social and mental health problems. Linked to valued outcomes and ability to achieve them.
- ▶ Multi-level processes and influences (psychological, physical, social, cultural and structural) that vary *over time* (Masten & O’Dougherty Wright, 2010).
- ▶ Dynamic and often ‘non-linear’, interactive nature of protective mechanisms and outcomes (Kirmayer et al., 2009; Luthar et al., 2000).

The Families and Imprisonment Research (FAIR) study)

- ▶ Prospective longitudinal study.
- ▶ ESRC funded.
- ▶ Building on earlier study 'Risk and Protective Factors in the Resettlement Imprisoned Fathers with their Families.

Research Objectives

- 1) to analyse the long-term interaction of risk and protective factors associated with resilience in families with previously imprisoned fathers
- 2) to improve knowledge of the relationship between psychological, social and environmental mechanisms affecting the resilience of prisoners' families
- 3) to provide insight into the stability of resilience over time and discover what factors promote continuity versus change;
- 4) to examine the role of formal and informal support, criminal justice and social policies on resilience at the individual and family level.
- 5) to identify promising strategies for reducing adversity and enhancing resilience of families in similar vulnerable circumstances.

54 families in the sample

Time 1 9 (2010-11)

54 families

- 54 fathers
- 54 mothers
- 90 children (45 interviewed)

Time 2 (2011-2)

49 families

- 40 fathers
- 49 mothers
- 80 children (39 interviewed)

Time 3 (2017-9)

40 families

52 families (outline data)

- 32 fathers
- 37 mothers
- 88 children (41 interviewed)

Methods

Interviews and standardised measures at 3 time points with fathers, mothers and children aged 4 - 18 yrs.

Time 1 within 4 months of the father's release.

Time 2 up to 6 months after the father's release.

Time 3 up to 6/7 years after the father's release

FINDINGS

quantitative descriptive statistics
qualitative analyses of children's interview data

Constancy and change in family units



Time 1

45 together
(83%)

9 separated
(17%)

Time 2

34 together
(24%)

18 separated
(69%)

2 status
unknown (2%)

Time 3

13 together
(24%)

37 separated
(69%)

3 one partner
deceased (6%)

1 status
unknown (2%)

Children interviewed at Time 3

Gender	19 (45%) female 23 (55%) male
Average age	12.4 years (SD 5 yrs)
Ethnicity	White British 67% Black/Black British 33% 19% Mixed race 5% Gypsy/Traveller
Living arrangements	31 (74%) lived with mother 8 (19%) with both parents 3 (7%) independently (+18)
Contact with father	31 (76%) children said they saw their father: 24 (60%) sometimes 7 (16%) always 9 (23%) said they never saw their father

Children's difficulties

	TIME 1	TIME 2	TIME 3
AVERAGE DIFFICULTIES PER CHILD WITHIN FAMILY	12.78 (SD 4.9)	11.07 (SD 6.2)	10.11 (SD 5.2)

n = 18 families

*Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997)
completed by primary caregiver.*

Experiences of multiple adversities e.g

- prison and criminal justice related hardships
- poverty
- family conflict

ON-GOING PRISON RELATED EFFECTS STIGMA

	YES	NO
Do you sometimes avoid people because you think they might look down on people who have a step/dad who has been in prison?	39% (n=12)	61% (n=19)
Have people used the fact that your dad/step dad was in prison to hurt you?	29% (n=9)	71% (n=22)

It was in the paper. People at my old school said 'that's the girl with a dad in prison' but I just brushed it off. He didn't mean it on purpose & he owns up to it. But it's hard. Tia

CHILDREN'S REFLECTIONS ON IMPACT OF FATHER'S PRISON SENTENCE

- ▶ *When you're a kid you think prison is scary. You think wow I never want to be in this place. Then, when I kept going I thought 'It's not that bad - it looks like they're having more fun. They're always smiling! Then I thought, oh well I don't mind if I get arrested. If I didn't see that when I was younger I don't think I would have done that. At first it's scary, then you hear the stories and you think it's just a holiday camp. Kevin*
- ▶ *I don't think we really did anything - we just carried on. I don't know if it's changed me. I want to think it hasn't, or made me stronger. Make you understand you're lucky. Jesse*
- ▶ *Can't really remember it. I only found out about it in the last year or so. Mum told me after the break-up. Ava*

REFLECTIONS ON IMPACT OF FATHER'S PRISON SENTENCE

- ▶ *I developed a severe anxiety disorder 3-6 months after he came out. I was convinced by everything that I was going to get in trouble. I was paranoid about doing anything. I think it was because of seeing the injustice of dad going to prison for something that wasn't his fault and was out of his control. Alex*

- ▶ *It gets easier as you get older. As a child you see the bad side all the time. I see both sides now & understand better. You take every day as it comes. It's not only you going through it - mum, dad, brother struggled. There are people you can talk to who understand. You know you're not the only one. I think there will always be part of you that holds a grudge. ..For all the hurt he's caused, he is my dad. Michelle*

RESILIENCE - SELF CONCEPT

	TRUE	NOT TRUE
I quickly adapt to new situations	69% (n=24)	31% (n=11)
I am confident I can find a solution to most of my problems	83% (n=29)	17% (n=6)
There is someone in my life I can always trust	100% (n=35)	

8 - 17 yrs

Resilience processes over time

▶ 1. Frequently talking to others

- ▶ T1 and T2 - younger ..talk to others.. usually Mum, sometimes teacher.. adult
- ▶ Mum significant. Change to boyfriend, girlfriend over time.

▶ 2. Strategies when older

- ▶ Greater reflection, rationalisation:
 - ▶ *A couple of years ago I would have said 1, but now I'm up high. I won't let anything get me down. Friends might be making more money than me but it's about how you feel. Kevin*
 - ▶ *Think about something I'm going to do in future. Something to cheer me up. Festivals, and I want to go Jesse*
- ▶ More independent activities
 - ▶ *Going for long walks - always helps. Claire*
 - ▶ *Doesn't happen very often. Play in room or go running Benjamin*

Gender comparisons

▶ Boys - internal orientation

- ▶ *Just bottle it up & keep it to myself. Go into my room. Keep to myself. Don't really like talking to people about these things. Just don't like it. Never tried it. Logan*

▶ Girls - external orientation - reach to others/ medication/food...

- ▶ *Go tell my mum Tia*
- ▶ *Talk to my boyfriend Ava*
- ▶ *Call my mum. Talk to boyfriend. Claire*
- ▶ *Food! And the medication definitely helps. Christine*

FAMILY LEVEL ASSOCIATIONS

- ▶ Resilience as comparative concept.
- ▶ 5 families where children had the least difficulties:
 - ▶ definite family structure
 - ▶ family-oriented life-style
 - ▶ mother plays a strong role
 - ▶ parents not always together and fathers may have been back to prison but both have contact and help look after children.
 - ▶ consistent support networks: wider family or friends
- ▶ 5 families where children had highest levels of difficulty
 - ▶ parental conflict
 - ▶ Limited access to support networks

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

- ▶ New insights into ‘resilience amongst prisoners’ children over time
 - ▶ Responses to prison varied
 - ▶ Negative effects faded for most children
 - ▶ Stigma and anxiety remain for some
- ▶ Children’s coping strategies changed over time, indication of gender variations.
- ▶ Family level analyses indicate the relevance of family structure, continued involvement of both parents in children’s lives, ‘active’ support networks.
- ▶ Findings resonate with earlier longitudinal studies of children’s resilience of recognition of change over time e.g. Werner and Smith, 2001.
- ▶ Highlight the potential for interruption and disruption (positive and negative) effects by new life experiences: anger may dissipate, anxieties may persist.
- ▶ Reinforce relevance of recognising children’s agency and a detailed understanding of their contexts.