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‘Packages’ of Risk: Implications for Determining the Effect of Maternal Incarceration on Child Wellbeing

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Interviewer: What’s the best thing that’s happened to you in the last six months?

Jason, 13: My mom came home from prison.

Interviewer: What’s the most stressful thing....?

Jason: My mom came home from prison. (Giordano, 2010: 147–148)

As scholars and practitioners alike have drawn attention to negative effects of incarceration, researchers have increasingly considered that one of the most important collateral consequences may be the impact on the well-being of children. Most research on the effects of parental incarceration has focused on the father’s incarceration, which is a reasonable emphasis given the much higher rates of male incarceration. Yet every jurisdiction includes a number of women incarcerated in local and state facilities, and as [authors] note, this number has been increasing (Guerino, Harrison, and Sabol, 2011). As the authors further underscore, similar to male incarceration, this phenomenon has become a bigger issue in the lives of poor and minority children who already face significant challenges (Wildeman, 2009). A compelling reason to focus research attention on maternal incarceration in particular is that while research clearly establishes that father involvement is an important basis of variation across a range of child well-being outcomes (e.g., Carlson, 2006; Dyer, Day, and Harper, 2013), mothers remain ‘close-in’ if not the primary caregivers for a majority of U.S. children. Thus it is important to determine not only whether there are aggregate effects of maternal incarceration on children, as the authors have explored in other recent analyses (authors, 2014), but how effects may vary, as in the current study.

The authors document inconsistencies and contradictory effects across previous studies that have examined the impact of maternal incarceration on child wellbeing—some finding detrimental effects, some essentially ‘null’ or no effect, and still other results hinting that incarceration might actually be beneficial to the child. In addition, they note that this variation is evident across investigations based on quantitative as well as qualitative methods. However, [names] conclude that one reason for the disparate findings may be variations in the type of sample employed, recognizing that maternal incarceration occurs at a relatively low base rate within the general population. Drawing on the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (in which a large proportion of the sample includes children born to unmarried parents) is a particular asset of this analysis, as 9% of mothers report

incarceration experience. This compares with the relatively small number of participants (1%) in studies such as the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) who report a background of maternal incarceration. This sample provides a basis not only for making the general comparison (children in families where a mother has been incarcerated vs. no maternal incarceration), but a larger sample for exploring the idea of conditional effects (some children affected more than others). In this analysis, the authors find that negative effects of maternal incarceration are observed only among the subgroup least likely to experience it, based on their more favorable socioeconomic, family, educational and lifestyle circumstances. Our objectives here are to further explore the potential meaning(s) and implications for policy of the aggregate findings (and the parallel pattern evidenced within families whose circumstances are consistent with a high propensity for incarceration), as well as of these conditional effects findings.

In general, the results of the current study are consistent with a perspective on incarceration effects developed through an examination of the lives of a sample of 158 children born to women and men with significant levels of juvenile and adult incarceration experience (Giordano, 2010). In that study, we followed up a group of delinquent youths originally interviewed as adolescents and incarcerated in institutions for juvenile offenders. We again interviewed these young people as adults (average age 30), when many had small children, and in connection with a second follow-up (average age 39), which focused primarily on issues of parenting and child well-being of the adolescent children of the original respondents. Many of the children born to this sample of respondents had experience with a mother's or father's incarceration or with both parents' criminal justice system involvement. Yet based on our interviews with these young people, and assessments of the total 'package' that was life within many of these families, we concluded that the parents' broader lifestyle (e.g., drug use, violent behavior, other forms of offending, economic and social marginality) appeared outsized in its effects on child wellbeing—relative to consequences stemming from the experience of maternal or paternal incarceration itself.

This conclusion seems very much in line with [authors] maternal incarceration results relying on the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study data, the thrust of an earlier commentary in this journal by the director for the Center for the Children of Incarcerated Parents (Johnston, 2006), and conclusions drawn from a more recent study based on interviews with caregivers of children with incarcerated parents (Turanovic, Rodriguez, and Pratt, 2012). Johnston's (2006) comments and suggestion that we may be "going down the wrong road" (i.e., focusing too much on the incarceration issue, not enough on the underlying difficulties/problems that predate incarceration) are of particular note, as the Center she directed was initially developed to address children's needs that stemmed from the incarceration experience. The research by Turanovic et al. is also important, as the researchers' interviews with caregivers provide a different vantage point for understanding what by all accounts are "complex family systems" characterized by a formidable set of disadvantages (this nicely parallels the authors' focus on propensity indices that include many of these other-than-incarceration factors). The caregivers interviewed within the context of their study also frequently expressed the idea of either positive changes or no change following incarceration, particularly noting that many of the women had mental health issues, problems with addiction, and histories of abuse. The researchers noted that in

many cases mothers of those in their sample had been involved intermittently in the lives of their children, or in other instances had not ever been primary caregivers. Turanovic et al. concluded that the finding that maternal incarceration is harmful may be due to "the research literature's inability to disentangle preexisting hardships from the focal incarceration" (2012: 945).

The current study makes a significant contribution on the 'disentangling' front, as the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWB) data include respondents and children whose circumstances reflect varying levels of disadvantage and hardship, as well as variability on whether or not the mother had been incarcerated. This provided the opportunity to determine whether an effect of incarceration was observed once these other disadvantages had been taken into account, as well as to examine the situation in which a child experienced incarceration even though the broader background reflected advantaged circumstances quite unlike the (more typical) configuration in which these other hardships were also present. The FFCWB study includes oversampling of unmarried parents who live in large cities, providing a sample of socioeconomically disadvantaged families, which increases the range of problematic circumstances of the children whose well-being was assessed. And in related work, the authors show how certain basic characteristics of their sample of incarcerated mothers are similar to those of women incarcerated in jail and state prison settings (Wildeman and Turney, 2014). However, two apparent differences are worthy of mention. First, the clear majority of children in the analytic sample (93%) lived with their biological mothers, as a contrast to studies cited above and national statistics (see e.g., Glaze and Maruschak, 2008) indicating that a larger share of incarcerated mothers may not live with the child prior to incarceration (or did so intermittently as Turanovic et al. indicated), or after they are released. As a further example, in the OLS study, 49% reported that they did not have custody of at least one minor child. In addition, as shown in results presented in Table 3 of [authors'] study, only 3% of mothers in the high propensity subgroup reported "a substance abuse problem" (as contrasted with 0.6% in the low propensity stratum), a finding that also diverges from other research, including prison surveys pointing to a central role of drug involvement in understanding women's offending patterns and paths to incarceration (Mumola and Karberg, 2006). The FFCWB question that taps drug problems (posed as a direct question) may have resulted in underreporting, and practical considerations limited the reach of the sample to respondents who completed the nine-year in-home interview. Yet if the sample to a degree underrepresents serious female offenders and their children, the sample as a whole is nevertheless disadvantaged relative to traditional survey samples, and the lives of children of incarcerated mothers in this sample include an array of additional disadvantages. The results of the authors' analyses, then, can be viewed as providing a conservative test, as no incarceration effect was observed even within the framework of the levels of disadvantage accessed via the FFCWB sampling strategy. Next we consider in more detail some of the implications of these findings.

The ‘central tendencies’ within these data may be of greatest importance from a policy standpoint

The authors’ methodological strategy identified a condition under which maternal incarceration itself seemed to result in detriments to child-wellbeing—the situation in which many aspects of children’s lives differed from the typical circumstances of children of incarcerated mothers. However, it would be premature to conclude from this analysis that policy initiatives and scarce resources should be directed to these unlikely-to-experience-the-event children, as the authors acknowledge.

First, as shown in Table 3, this is a relatively small subgroup, relative to the larger group of children with incarcerated mothers whose circumstances include the full ‘package’ of these other hardships and sources of risk. In addition, information was not provided about the absolute levels of the difficulties observed (i.e., did the children in the low propensity subgroup who experienced parental incarceration score lower on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary test and higher on delinquency than their counterparts in the high propensity subgroup, or was it simply that they scored lower than would be expected given their generally favorable status on these other dimensions?). In most studies, numerous layers of risk are linked to less favorable outcomes (e.g., Chapman et al., 2004; Evans and English, 2002; Evans and Kim, 2010; Schilling, Aseltine, and Gore, 2007; Turner and Lloyd, 1995). For example, Whitaker et al. (2006) examined the impact on early child well-being of three maternal problems, including mother’s mental illness, drug use and domestic violence, and found that the presence of all three was particularly detrimental. This idea of a highly negative impact of configurations of risk is also consistent with the current interest in polyvictimization (Finkelhor et al., 2011; Finkelhor, Ormrod, and Turner, 2007; Ford, Elhai, Connor, and Frueh, 2010), a line of research emphasizing that a nexus or ‘piling on’ of such aversive experiences appears to be especially deleterious for child well-being outcomes. Finally, considering the other features of the lives of the low propensity subgroup (high percentage of the parents had post-secondary education, a majority lived with both parents, and a minority were living in poverty) provides reason for expecting that many of the children in this subgroup may be able to benefit over the long haul from these resources and potential sources of resilience as they begin to navigate the peak periods of risk (adolescence, the transition to adulthood). In contrast, those in the high propensity subgroup are likely to face additional challenges due to their disadvantaged structural locations (e.g., higher concentrations of delinquent peers, lower quality schools), and these factors may combine with the earlier experienced difficulties to compromise the long term well-being of many of those in this multiple-disadvantages subgroup. As the ‘usual, customary’ children of the incarcerated mothers, these should be the focus of significant policy attention. That the incarceration experience does not contribute uniquely to their scores on the well-being indices should not be a basis for minimizing the risks facing the high propensity group, and the group as a whole (of which they are a major part).

Some parts of the ‘package’ (notably offending and incarceration) are especially intimate in their connections to one another and to overall risk

The idea of configurations of risk has long been of sociological interest (e.g., early research in the Chicago School/neighborhoods—Park and Burgess, 1925; Shaw and McKay, 1942), but there is a particularly close association between offending and incarceration—one that is not always foregrounded in discussions of and research on incarceration effects. Thus, findings from the Chicago School research highlighted that various societal problems tended to cluster within the same neighborhoods; yet clearly infant mortality is a social problem distinct from criminal behavior. In contrast, incarceration does not occur (except among the falsely accused) without some level of offending that precedes it. In spite of this basic linkage, as Uggen (2013: 2) recently suggested, the current interest in mass incarceration has developed somewhat independently of research in the causal tradition:

Criminologists such as Edwin Sutherland viewed the process of making laws, breaking laws, and the societal reaction against lawbreaking as “three aspects of a somewhat unified sequence of interactions.” Contemporary advances in these areas, however, have increasingly developed in separate literatures.

Our view is that as we consider the various elements that make up propensity (or the idea of a ‘package’ of disadvantages), the parent’s offending behavior is a key element and part of the sequence of actions and (societal) reactions that *together* are likely to adversely affect child well-being. Our own critique of the incarceration effects literature developed from what we saw as a general inattention to the stresses and negative dynamics attached to the underlying ‘lifestyle’ or offending aspects of respondents’ histories. Nevertheless, periods of incarceration were generally part and parcel of the life experiences of the women we interviewed, and in turn were intertwined in the life experiences and effects on their developing children.

In many respects, the processes that directly influence the child’s well-being (mechanisms) are themselves quite parallel and are often part of a reciprocally related process. For example, maternal drug use, particularly in disadvantaged contexts, may be associated with housing instability and frequent school moves, but these may occur in a sequence that also includes moves occasioned by arrests and periods of incarceration. As an example, Daniella, a respondent who participated in the OLS study, had six children, and when interviewed in her small apartment at the first adult follow-up, none of the children (ages 10, 9, 7, 6, 5 and 2) were living in the household with her. Yet most of these children except the two youngest had lived with Daniella at various times, while residing at other points with either Daniella’s mother or their aunt. Maurice, now living with his father, describes his history of school moves, which were sometimes related to one of Daniella’s jail stays, but also to periods of especially heavy drug use, and the family’s meager economic circumstances:

I went to Jefferson my whole freshman year...sophomore year second semester I went to Fairview...And then first quarter junior year I went to Central, and then I went back to Jefferson my whole junior year...because I was moving with my mom. See when I was going to Fairview, I was staying with my auntie, and I moved with my mom my sophomore year right when I switch...then started off at Central,

because she's [mother] in Central district, then I moved with my dad that same year, and then back to Jefferson the rest of my junior year. Now I'm at Walnut Grove [lives with Dad who also moved again]...I really don't like it that much. I don't know, it ain't my type of school. (Giordano, 2010: 114)

Each of the lengthy interviews with mothers and children were transcribed and later abstracted, and cases were often given a shorthand label to aid recall during analyses of these data. Daniella's label was "more jail, violence, drugs, misery," a descriptor that serves to highlight the total 'package' idea and interconnected nature of Daniella's—and her children's—difficulties.

As scholarship in the mass incarceration tradition has developed, it is easy to understand why offending and incarceration have often been 'decoupled': researchers have shown that incarceration trends are deeply influenced by political and economic interests, and significant increases in incarceration have occurred even as crime rates stabilized or declined (Western, 2006). Further, studies of decision-making across various levels of the criminal justice system have revealed numerous biases, inconsistencies, and jurisdictional differences (Steffensmeier and Demuth, 2000; Ulmer, Light, and Kramer, 2011; Zatz, 1987). However, particularly when viewed at the individual and family level, those who garner incarceration experience often have a fairly significant history of offending. For example, we decided to interview girls at the state juvenile correctional facility (which later became the OLS longitudinal study) in connection with our larger neighborhood based study of female delinquency. The impetus for this phase of the study was that even though we had oversampled in high crime areas, the number of female adolescents who could be considered delinquents was nevertheless quite low. In a comparison of responses of the young people incarcerated at the state correctional facilities and within the context of the neighborhood-based study, we found that the incarcerated girls and boys were not only more delinquent than the average neighborhood youth, but relative to the most delinquent youth included in the neighborhood survey (Cernkovich, Giordano, and Pugh, 1985). Consistent with this, we note that even within the context of studies focusing on biases in criminal justice decisions, most research shows that seriousness of the offense is a significant predictor of police actions (Black, 1980; Wilson, 1978), and, along with prior offenses, a robust predictor of sentencing decisions—including the incarceration decision as well as determinations about sentence length (Spohn, 2000; Zatz, 2000). This does not equate to the idea that incarceration is the appropriate option for handling many of these cases, but it does suggest that a parent's incarceration is an efficient 'marker' of a significant offending history—with its own attendant costs to child well-being.

Offending Often is Up-Close and Personal

Why should we be concerned with the offending side of things? The offending component of this offending-incarceration package may last longer than typical spells of incarceration (particularly if these revolve around the typically shorter jail stays), is often intrusive (i.e., is part of the child's daily life), and provides a direct pathway to the child's own aggressive behavior, delinquency involvement and substance use. For example, when Kierston was asked about how old she was when she became aware that her mother was using drugs, she

replied “seven. She’d just stay out all night. This has been going on since I was seven years old, and I’m twenty one” (Giordano, 2010:141). Jason, quoted at the outset, was on one hand happy that his mother had recently come home from prison, and yet also found her presence stressful. This respondent told the interviewer that he had “a hammer and I sit it right next to my bed ‘cause I know if my mom comes in messed up on drugs, she gets real violent...” (Giordano, 2010: 1). The life history narrative makes clear that Jason has at times attempted to directly manage the problem, and provides a caution to the idea (Hirschi, 1969) that parents, even if deviant, rarely reveal this to their children:

I’ve seen her pass out and stuff fall out of her pockets and hands and stuff. I flush it down the toilet and I throw it as far as I can...and, like, I spit on it, and...If it’s pills and stuff I put them in hot water...then down the sink ‘cause I know she’ll drink it...I flush them down the toilet...‘cause if I put them down the sink she always like, she thinks about getting in the pipes, and she always looks for wrenches and stuff. (Giordano, 2010: 144)

Jason also resented that in the past his mother had stolen from him (“why would you steal off me? Why her own son?” (Giordano, 2010: 145)), even as he expressed love for her and fears for her safety out on the streets (“I gotta worry about...seeing in the newspaper that they found a dead body—it’s heartbreaking” (Giordano, 2010: 149)). At the time of the interview, Jason expressed a strong desire to go down a path that was different (“everybody expects me to be like just like my mom and everybody knows I just ain’t like my mom” (Giordano, 2010:168)). However, perhaps even more heartbreaking than this 13 year old’s discussion of his complicated concerns and emotions, we note that as of this writing 21 year old Jason had himself accumulated 14 separate entries on the state department of corrections website (e.g., drug use paraphernalia, resisting arrests, breaking and entering, failure to appear...).

The offending aspect of the package also potentially provides more detailed lessons (relative to the child’s experience of the parent’s incarceration) that are directly implicated in intergenerational transmission processes. Some studies of incarceration effects focus on the feelings of loss and experience of stigma that may surround the parent’s incarceration (Arditti, 2005). Murray et al.’s recent work is consistent in emphasis, describing mechanisms that heighten the risk of negative outcomes for the next generation, including “trauma of parent-child separation, stigma associated with the incarceration, and social and economic strains that result from the parent’s absence” (Murray, Bijleveld, Farrington, and Loeber, 2014: 27).

First, there are parallel or interrelated dynamics linked to the parent’s offending. For example, one young respondent talked about being embarrassed when his mother would come to pick him up at a friend’s and it was obvious that she was high; another pointed out that after her mother came home from jail she would often promise to stop using drugs, “but after about 4 days she’ll take off.” Even more ‘on-point,’ the parent’s behavior provides a ready model and direct, frequent communications to the child heighten the likelihood that the latter will come to rely on aggression during conflict situations or draw on drugs or alcohol use as a coping strategy. Other attitudes that are not strictly speaking “definitions favorable to the violation of law” (Sutherland, 1939), such as negative reactions to teachers

and other authority figures, may decrease the child's access to traditional means to a more prosocial lifestyle. For example, when Susan came home from school and told her mother about an altercation with her teacher, her mother went back to the school and wound up physically assaulting the teacher herself.

Thus, viewing parental effects only through the lens of a stress process, or in light of what is missing from the child's life, does not complete the portrait of mechanisms involved, particularly when the focus is on externalizing behaviors or early juvenile delinquency, two of the well-being outcomes assessed in the current study. In addition, the life histories we elicited from the OLS respondents provided ample evidence that what is 'present' in the way of antisocial influences extends well beyond the attitudes and behaviors of the focal parent. In addition to antisocial partners, other family members and friends may comprise a wider network of affiliations that also contribute to children's encapsulation in worlds that include but are not limited to a familiarity with prison and jails. This is a particular problem for children of women with offending (and incarceration) histories, as some of these same individuals may become caregivers when the women are unable to care for their children—whether due to their mother's drug involvement or other lifestyle concerns or because of periods of incarceration.

Policy Implications and Future Research Directions

The author's research showed that children growing up in families characterized by maternal incarceration do not fare well on a range of well-being outcomes, and in our view the policy implications should be drawn primarily from these aggregate findings. The researchers also showed conditional effects, as a negative impact of incarceration was observed when family circumstances did not include the package of other disadvantages that tend to co-occur with the incarceration experience. However, most children of incarcerated parents or who have parents with incarceration experience do experience these other forms of disadvantage, including not only less favorable social and economic circumstances, but exposure to parents whose offending histories contribute to risk directly. We should not conclude, either from this analysis or our own research, however, that incarceration is really 'inconsequential.' In the long run, it may prove more useful to conceptualize these components as part of a difficult-to-pry-apart package, and also to develop ways to more effectively capture the idea of a sequence of events that results in greatly diminished life chances. Certainly the parents and children's problems do not all stem from incarceration, but periods of incarceration often further marginalize individuals and families (e.g., some forms of housing are off limits, the criminal record diminishes employment prospects) as critics of mass incarceration trends have effectively highlighted.

In the short term, it is important to devote significant resources to the children of incarcerated mothers, as they are an extremely vulnerable group. And in our view much of the focus should be on the 'inconsequential effects' or high propensity subgroup (i.e., those with all the interrelated disadvantages). Generally consistent with the study results, the resources provided should extend beyond efforts to address the stresses associated with the mother's incarceration (e.g., facilitating more frequent visits), to include safe alternative placements, treatment for abuse or other forms of victimization, and positive alternative

models who can provide concrete support (e.g., academic assistance). Future research on conditional effects could be directed toward features of the child's life that often but do not inevitably serve as pathways to greater difficulty, such as the frequency of school or residential moves. Focusing on these areas could provide additional direction for ways to interrupt what is often a formidable press in the direction of an intergenerational pattern of continued difficulties.

Longer term, high quality programs to address many women offenders' underlying problems with addiction and/or mental health issues are needed, as prison and jail settings often do not provide intensive, consistent delivery of these services. Women relative to men in the OLS study were much more likely to have frequent contact with their children, in spite of the challenges posed by their offending and their incarceration. This suggests the need for support and monitoring, whether this occurs post-incarceration, after drug-treatment, or ideally, participation in the newer generation of programming designed around the multiple problems and needs of women offenders (Van Voorhis, 2012).

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