Parenting and the association between maternal criminal justice involvement and adolescent delinquency☆

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ABSTRACT

The high rate of adult criminal justice involvement in the United States has resulted in many unintended consequences for families of offenders. Families involved with the criminal justice system are disproportionately involved with the child welfare system, and adolescents involved in both systems (i.e., dual system involvement) exhibit higher levels of delinquency. Yet, a lack of research exists on dual system involvement and the effects on youth. The current study leveraged nationally representative and longitudinal data of families involved in the child welfare system to examine whether maternal criminal justice involvement predicted increases in youth delinquency. An ecological model tested the effects of maternal justice involvement beyond cumulative risks as well as the potential buffer of parental monitoring and non-violent discipline on system involvement. Results suggested child welfare-involved youth exhibited similar levels of delinquency over time, regardless of maternal justice involvement. Although youth with maternal justice involvement reported more parental monitoring, the level of monitoring mattered more for youth without maternal justice involvement who exhibited decreased delinquency in the presence of high parental monitoring compared to low monitoring. The differential pattern of association between parental monitoring and youth delinquency for dual-system involved families suggests they are distinct and may carry implications for treatment response aimed at delinquency reduction through parent training. These findings underscore the importance of interagency coordination around policy and interventions to identify these high risk families at risk of slipping through the cracks of multiple service involvement.

1. Introduction

The prison population in the United States is the largest in the world and continues to grow at the highest rate compared to other countries (Walmsley, 2013). Reforms in US criminal justice policies in the 1980s and 1990s, including mandatory sentencing laws, have increased the number of people coming into contact with the criminal justice system and lengthened prison sentences (Phillips, Dettlaff, & Baldwin, 2010). Approximately one in thirty-two adults in the United States is under some form of correctional supervision, including parole (Glaze, 2010). This expansion of the criminal justice system has been associated with unintended consequences for youth and families (Travis & Waul, 2003). The most recent survey on parental incarceration among state and federal inmates found that 809,800 had minor children, an increase of 79% between 1991 and 2007 (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

The growing trend of parental involvement within the criminal justice system poses a serious public problem, especially given evidence of intergenerational transmission of crime and incarceration (Dallaire, 2007; Huebner & Gustafson, 2007; Murray & Farrington, 2005). A link between parental incarceration and antisocial and delinquent behavior in youth is well established in the literature (Giordano, 2010; Swisher & Roettger, 2011). When interpreting and comparing the results of these studies it is important to note that there are differences in the operationalization and use of these key terms. The term parental incarceration can range across the spectrum of criminal justice involvement from the detainment by law enforcement authorities in a local jail to the serving of extended sentences in state or federal penitentiaries. The use of antisocial, delinquent, or deviant behaviors generally refers to problem externalizing behaviors that violate established social norms or laws (e.g., persistent lying, criminal behavior) (Murray,
of 161 published and unpublished manuscripts, negative aspects of parenting (e.g., neglect, hostility, and rejection) and poor supervision (low levels of active parental monitoring, parental knowledge, and child disclosure) were strongly linked to delinquency (Hoeye et al., 2009). This is in accordance with the results of a previous meta-analysis which found parental rejection and poor supervision as being among the best predictors of delinquency (Loebber & Stouthamer-Loebber, 1986). Conversely, positive parenting behaviors (i.e., nonviolent alternatives to corporal punishment such as active parental monitoring, explanation, and consistent discipline) have been associated with lower levels of delinquency (Forehand, Miller, Dutra, & Chance, 1997; Griffin, Botvin, Scheier, Diaz, & Miller, 2000; Simons, Chao, Conger, & Elder, 2001). For example, in a study examining a sample of families referred to treatment for antisocial boys, Forgatch (1988; as cited in Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989) found that changes in parental discipline and monitoring significantly reduced delinquency in the boys compared to families who did not change these parenting dimensions.

Research on incarceration and parenting has focused on parenting disruptions as a risk factor related to delinquency. Parents with criminal histories have exhibited lower levels of effective parenting and higher rates of child maltreatment and neglect (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011; Phillips et al., 2010; Seymour, 1998). One-third of the families investigated for child maltreatment have had a primary caregiver arrested at least once (Phillips & Dettlaff, 2007), and one in eight had been arrested in the past 12 months (Phillips, Burns, Wagner, & Barth, 2004). Extensive literature has demonstrated associations among youth behavioral problems, ineffective parenting, and child welfare involvement (Burns et al., 2004; Dishion & McMahon, 1998; Hoeye et al., 2009; Patterson et al., 1989). Additionally, research has demonstrated that maltreated youth have been shown to be at increased risk of adverse outcomes, including internalizing and externalizing symptoms in adolescence and alcoholism and depression in adulthood (Anda et al., 2002; Moylan et al., 2010). However, less is known about the association between parental incarceration and parenting among child welfare-involved families (Lee, Fang, & Luo, 2013).

A policy relevant question remains whether youth delinquency associated with parental incarceration functions through deficits in parenting or accumulation of other multilevel risks. Significant overlap between families involved in the criminal justice and child welfare systems suggests potential for intervention. Families in contact with the child welfare system might benefit from tailored screening and intervention. The presence of evidence-based policy and interventions to promote positive parenting practices emphasizes the importance of the question. However, empirical investigation needs to probe the nature of the relationship.

The present study takes advantage of longitudinal data available on a nationally representative sample of families investigated for child abuse and neglect. The data provide an opportunity to examine the extent to which caregivers in the child welfare system report previous justice involvement, as well as change in youth delinquency over time. Using ecological systems theory, models investigate whether maternal justice involvement represents a unique threat for delinquent behavior in the context of accumulated risk at multiple levels and developmental domains. Maternal justice involvement included families with a history of maternal arrest rather than incarceration because they represent a larger at-risk group compared to the small subset of families having had mothers in prison. Empirical evidence has consistently demonstrated that parental arrest is associated with increased exposure to risk factors compared to youth in the general and high risk populations, including parental substance abuse, parental mental health problems, and domestic violence (Dannerbeck, 2005; Farrington, Jolliffe, Loebber, Stouthamer-Loebber, & Kalb, 2001; Murray & Farrington, 2005; Phillips et al., 2004; Phillips, Burns, Wagner, Kramer, & Robbins, 2002; Phillips, Erkanli, Keeler, Costello, & Angold, 2006). Additionally, the role of parenting is investigated; ecological theory suggests positive parenting could buffer the effects of maternal justice involvement, however, this
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