

Teacher Support, Parental Incarceration, and Low Academic Achievement in Justice-Involved Youth

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Faculty Introduction

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Amandamay Naquin-Eason assembled and executed a novel research study with important implications for the well-being of justice-involved adolescents. Her study was supported by the McNair Scholars program. She utilized archival data from a large, publicly available study entitled the Pathways to Desistance Study. Using that data, Amandamay proposed and completed a study examining correlates of academic performance in justice-involved adolescents. In particular, she hypothesized about and examined the potential roles of teacher bonding and parental incarceration on academic performance in this high-risk group. Amandamay works as a substitute teacher and her findings are therefore contextualized from this real-world perspective.

Abstract

Just over two million youth under the age of 18 were arrested in 2008 (Gottesman & Schwarz, 2011). Many of these youth also have incarcerated parents (Eddy & Reid, 2003) and there are well documented links between parental incarceration, juvenile delinquency, and low academic achievement (Denno, 1990; Dallaire, 2007; Phillips, Burns, Wagner, Kramer, & Robbins, 2002). The following research paper examines the relation between parental incarceration and low academic achievement among justice-involved youth while also exploring teacher support as a mechanism for explaining the link between parental incarceration and low academic achievement. Statistical analyses indicated low academic achievement and a significant relation between teacher support and academic achievement in justice-involved youth, although the role of parental incarceration was non-significant. Given that justice involved youth with incarcerated parents are at risk for lower academic success, the potential protective role of teacher support warrants future research (Denno, 1990; Dallaire, 2007; Phillips, Burns, Wagner, Kramer, & Robbins, 2002).

Over 2,000,000 youth under the age of 18 were arrested in 2008 (Gottesman & Schwarz, 2011). Several studies have examined relations between academic performance and delinquent/criminal behavior. Many researchers have identified impaired cognitive functioning (Hirschi & Hindelang, 1977) and academic achievement (Denno, 1990) in adolescent offenders, with prospective research indicating that these relations can be identified in children as young as three years old (Stattin & Klackenberg-Larsson, 1993). Indeed, delinquent youth complete less education and show poor academic achievement compared to their non-offending peers (Chung, Mulvey, & Steinberg, 2011). Siennick and Staff (2008) found that adolescent offenders were less likely to enroll in college when compared to their non-offending peers and, if they did enroll in college, they were less likely to continue until their projected graduation date. Understanding factors that are related to the academic achievement of adolescent offenders is essential for effective interventions and improved practices (Weinstein, 2016).

Parental incarceration is a growing public issue with serious ramifications for youth (Dallaire D. H., 2007a). In 2007, it was estimated that 809,800 out of 1,518,535 prisoners were parents of minors (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). According to Glaze and Marushak (2010), approximately 2.3% of American children are affected by parental incarceration with other researchers estimating that approximately 2 million children have an incarcerated parent (Eddy & Poehlmann, 2010). Parental incarceration is particularly prevalent among justice-involved youth; incarcerated parents report that 5-30% of their adolescent children were arrested at least once and, indeed, children of incarcerated parents are more likely to be arrested themselves (Eddy & Reid, 2003).

Importantly, parental incarceration has been linked to academic difficulties (Phillips, Burns, Wagner, Kramer, & Robbins, 2002). Children with a history of parental incarceration are likely to have school problems (Phillips et al., 2002). In a study conducted by Turney and Haskins (2014), children of incarcerated fathers were more likely to be held back than their peers. Additionally, children of incarcerated parents are also vulnerable to psychosocial maladjustment in which they are more likely to demonstrate the negative use of emotion labels, lower academics, and display increased anxious/depressed behaviors when exposed to their parent's criminal activity, arrest, and sentencing (Dallaire & Wilson, 2010). Burchinal, Robert, Hooper, and Zeisel (2000) found that environmental risk factors have a negative impact on children's intellectual development and performance. Levels of risk within the environment have also been

found to have an impact on children's performance on cognitive tests (Campbell, Burchinal, Skinner, & Gardner, 2000).

The broad aim of this study is to examine a possible mechanism—teacher bonding—that might buffer the effects of parental incarceration on youth academic achievement. Prior research suggests that children of incarcerated parents are viewed more negatively by important adults—including teachers. In a study examining teacher's expectations for children of incarcerated parents, researchers found that teachers rated the hypothetical children of incarcerated mothers as less competent than children whose mother was absent for other reasons (Dallaire & Wilson, 2010).

Conversely, a consensus exists that teacher support is linked to student involvement in academics and achievement. Adolescents and children need to feel connected to their educators. Studies show that students with supportive relationships in school exhibit better academics (Klem & Connell, 2004). Youth

desire the opportunity to make decisions, but they also need a clear sense of structure that enables them to make decisions (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). Teachers can provide consistency,

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expectations, and predictable consequences. The more support from teachers, the more successful the adolescent will be (Skinner & Belmont, 1995). If results indicate that teacher bonding contributes a protective effect that enables academic success in justice-involved youth with incarcerated parents, then interventions designed to enhance teacher bonding should be researched as one component of improving outcomes and mitigating future risk for justice-involved youth with incarcerated parents.

Limitations of the current research are important considerations for the current study. First, few studies have looked at whether teacher support plays a role in academics of adolescent offenders in relation to parental incarceration. Parental incarceration, as aforementioned, places youth at very high risk for academic problems and, thus, understanding the role that teacher bonding may play has significant intervention implications. Second, the current study builds upon prior research by examining these variables in a justice-involved sample—an additionally vulnerable segment of the population. Third, incarcerated parents and caregivers in place are

likely to have misgivings about allowing researchers to talk to their children (Snyder-Joy, & Carlo, 1998) and may fear state involvement (Dallaire D. H., 2007b). Thus, most research on parental incarceration is derived from information supplied by parents and caregivers alone (Dannerbeck, 2005). The current study goes beyond this literature to examine the relationship between adolescent academic achievement and parental incarceration in a sample of justice-involved youth where the youth reported on teacher bonding themselves. In sum, this study will examine the role of teacher support in relation to parental incarceration and academic achievement among justice-involved youth, with the expectation that adolescents with incarcerated parents receive less support from their teachers and, thus, their academic achievement suffers.

Participants

This study used archival data from participants who enrolled in The Pathways to Desistance study and were observed for seven years after their enrollment. Each participant had been found guilty of some form of property crime. Interviews included adolescents, family members, and friends. Data for The Pathways to Desistance study were collected from Philadelphia as well as Phoenix. The study recruited adolescent offenders between 2000 and 2003. Participants received compensation based on a graduated payment scale. Standard informed consent/assent procedures were utilized (Mulvey, Schubert, & Piquero, Pathways to Desistance—Final Technical, 2014).

Participant age ranged between 14-17 years. Participants that were missing data on any key study variable were deleted to create a final data set with complete data. Initially, 1,354 adolescents were included in this study. One-hundred forty participants were deleted due to missing data and, after deletions, complete data were available for 1,207 adolescents. For the current study, participant gender composition included 1045 males and 162 females. Ethnic composition consisted of 249 White, 499 Black, 404 Hispanic, and 55 Other.

Materials and Method

The current study examined baseline data from the Pathways to Desistance study. Baseline data were collected between 2000 and 2003 during participant enrollment (Mulvey et al., 2014). These data, as well as relevant codebooks and construct information, are available for download via the study's website at <http://www.pathwaysstudy.pitt.edu/index.html>. The variables listed below were selected for consideration from a broad range

of variables in the Pathways to Desistance data set. IBM SPSS Software was used to conduct statistical analyses to test the hypotheses.

Biological parental arrests were determined by asking participants to select a numeric value of zero if their biological mother or father were never arrested or a numeric value of one if their biological mother or biological father has been arrested or jailed (Mulvey et al., 2014). When determining if both biological parents were arrested, participants were asked to select a numeric value of zero if neither biological parent was arrested or jailed, one if both biological parents were arrested or jailed, or two if one of the biological parents were arrested or jailed, but not both (Mulvey et al., 2014).

Teacher bonding was determined using 13 questions on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” The average was taken for the items associated with each subscale (Mulvey et al., 2014).

Academic grades were determined by asking participants to select a numeric value of one if they made mostly A’s, two if they made about half A’s and half B’s, three if they made mostly B’s, four if they made about half B’s and half C’s, five if they made mostly C’s, six if they made about half C’s and half D’s, seven if they made mostly D’s, or eight if they made mostly below D’s (Mulvey et al., 2014).

Results

When participants were asked if their biological mother had been arrested or jailed, results indicated that 17.9% said yes and 82.1% said no (Mulvey et al., 2014). When asked if their biological father had been arrested or jailed, 34.2% said yes and 65.8% said no (Mulvey et al., 2014). When asked if their biological mother and father were arrested or jailed, results indicated that 9.4% said yes, 33.2% said that their biological mother or father had been arrested or jailed, but not both, and 57.3% said that neither biological parents had been arrested or jailed (Mulvey et al., 2014).

Participants were asked what their grades were like in school. Results indicate that approximately 3.3% made mostly A’s, 12.9% made about half A’s and half B’s, 6% had made mostly B’s, 23.1% had made half B’s and half C’s, 14.3% had made mostly C’s, 22.2% had made about half C’s and half D’s, 8% had made mostly D’s, and 10.3% had made mostly below D’s. This indicates that approximately 40.5% of these adolescents made half D’s or lower grades in comparison to their peers who made good grades with a percent of 59.5%.

Chi-square analyses were used to examine relations between adolescent academic performance and parental arrest. Analyses in relation to biological mother arrest did not provide evidence of a significant relation with adolescent academic performance (*Chi-Square* = 0.94, $p = .759$). Regarding biological father incarceration in relation to grades, *Chi-Square* = 0.97, $p = .633$. However, chi square analyses indicated that there was significant relation between teacher bonding and grades (*Chi-Square* = 24.770, $p = .001$). Lastly, chi-square analyses indicated that there was no significant relation between biological mother's incarceration and teacher bonding (*Chi-Square* = 2.816, $p = 0.93$).

Discussion

The current study explores three variables: teacher support, academic achievement, and parental incarceration among justice-involved youth. First, researchers wanted to examine whether parental incarceration would have a significant statistical relation with the academic performance of justice-involved youth. The researchers believed that parental incarceration would be associated with low academics among justice-involved youth. Second, researchers were interested in the role of teacher bonding in the context of parental incarceration and low academics among justice-involved youth. Researchers believed teachers may serve as a protective factor for those youth such that teacher bonding would be associated with higher academic performance.

According to the findings of the current study regarding parental incarceration, more than half of the sample of participants indicated that they had either a biological mother or father incarcerated. This indicates that this is a common experience for justice-involved youth. Previous research has indicated that parental incarceration may be a significant risk factor for low academic achievement and youth delinquency (Eddy & Reid, 2003; Phillips, Burns, Wagner, Kramer, & Robbins, 2002). Results of the current study contradict past research because it indicates that parental incarceration did not have a significant effect on justice-involved youth's academic achievement. Previous findings suggest that youth who have an incarcerated parent are more susceptible to grade retention, academic difficulties, behavioral issues, cognitive issues, and emotional maladjustment (Turney & Haskins, 2014).

The findings also suggest that parental incarceration did not have a significant effect on youths' ability to bond with teachers. Previous research has suggested that a parent's incarceration may sometimes introduce stigma towards the child or adolescent, thereby weakening the potential

for a strong, positive bond between student and educator (Dannerbeck, 2005). However, results of this study did not confirm this suggestion, showing that there was no significant link between parental incarceration and teacher bonding.

Overall, the findings indicate that the stronger the bond between student and educator, the more likely students were to do better with their academics. This aligns with previous research indicating that when an adolescent is provided with a positive role model, as well as a caring environment for interpersonal relationships and skills, academic achievement will increase. Previous research has indicated that when adolescents are deprived of such variables, then their likelihood to do better with their academics decreases (Klem & Connell, 2004).

For the current study, statistical significance was noted when considering teacher bonding in relation to academic achievement. Results suggest higher levels of bonding with teachers may play a significant role in the academic achievement of delinquent youth who have an incarcerated parent (Dallaire, 2007). When considering previous research, a link exists between parental incarceration and academic achievement. Teachers may be able to better assist youth in the classroom as well as improve practices among educators. Previous research indicates that teacher support and bonding are positive factors for students to achieve academic success (Klem & Connell, 2004).

The current study had several limitations that may have impacted the results. First, the current study does not contain participants who were non-delinquents with good academics. This may have had an impact on results concerning parental incarceration and academic achievement among justice-involved youth. Second, the primary makeup of the given sample are males (Mulvey et al., 2014). Third, data used for the current study were limited to archival data that was outdated and measures available were limited. Future studies may consider using more recent data that also possess a larger spectrum of measures to examine. Lastly, future researchers may want to consider other variables, such as who the adolescent had been raised by and for what period, to better understand links between the key study variables. ■

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Student Biography

Amandamay Naquin-Eason graduated with a double major in Psychology and Criminal Justice and a minor in Human Services from SHSU in August 2018. During her undergraduate education, she joined the McNair Scholars program, where she began her research with Dr. Amanda Venta. Her research interests in teacher support in relation to justice-involved youth with incarcerated parents were sparked by working with children at College Station Independent School District and with the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. Beginning in fall 2018, she will be pursuing her Masters in Clinical Mental Health Counseling at SHSU with future goals to earn a PhD in Counseling Psychology. Furthermore, Amandamay has aspirations to expand and continue her current research to better improve intervention practices among educators working with justice-involved youth who have incarcerated parents.

