

The Negative Cognitive Effects of Parental Incarceration on Children

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Abstract

The proposed study aims to identify if children with incarcerated parents have negatively associated academic cognitive development. By providing online tests to students of the Columbus, Ohio public school system in grades three through eight that are based on the appropriate Ohio Achievement Test for each respective grade, each child's academic cognition will be assessed. The child will be asked if they have an incarcerated parent at the end of the test to avoid the question itself influencing academic performance. The children's test scores will be separated into the respectively associated group, non-incarcerated or incarcerated parent. The test scores of the incarcerated parent group will be compared to the scores of the non-incarcerated parent group via a one-tailed t-test. It is expected the children belonging to the incarcerated parent group will have lower test scores than the non-incarcerated parent group, thus indicating a negative relationship between parental incarceration and academic cognitive development.

Introduction

With the early years of a child's life being the most formative, it is important to have both parents actively participating in the child's development. When at least one parent is absent from the child's life, disruptions in their development becomes a possibility. The study by Murphey and Cooper reports that almost seven percent of children from 2011 to 2012 in the United States have a parent that was incarcerated during some part of their life from the ages of zero through seventeen (2015). With more than five million children having a parent in prison at some point in their childhood, the effects it has on their development should be investigated. As the maturation of children is greatly influenced by their environment, it is reasonable to believe that having one or both parents incarcerated during some time in their child's life from birth through age seventeen has a negative impact on their academic cognitive development.

By not having such an influential person, such as a parent, in someone's life due to incarceration, the potentiality of incurring issues with mental health is not completely unfounded. The study by Davis and Shlafer used demographic data to provide a detailed investigation into those most at risk for developing mental health issues by having a parent incarcerated (2016). As Davis and Shlafer hypothesized, adolescents of incarcerated parents reported a higher affinity to have poor mental health. Moreover, it was older adolescent females who were the child of a parent currently incarcerated that were at the most risk of developing issues with their mental health (2016). An important discovery that Davis and Shlafer made during their investigation was that having a close relationship with the parent while they are incarcerated served to moderate the probability of developing mental health issues (2016). Sadly, on average children reported a negative relationship between the closeness they felt with their parent and their being incarcerated.

It is impossible to effectively discuss the topic of incarceration without addressing the issue of racial disparity within the prison population. Haskins notes in her paper that "nearly 60 percent of Black children and 45 percent of Hispanic children [experience] paternal incarceration at some point by age nine, whereas for Whites the percentage hovers at around 30" (2016, pg. 874-875). Haskins found that children who experienced their father being incarcerated for the first time in their lives between the ages of one and nine were at greater risk for having cognitive dysfunctions than the other age groups in her research. This is concerning not only because paternal imprisonment comes with the risk of negatively affecting children's cognitive abilities within academics, but also perpetuates intergenerational education disparities due to the difference in frequency of incarceration among non-white individuals.

Like mental health at large, parental incarceration is associated with significant stigmatization of the child. Some children, Philips and Gates explain, can acquire a sense of guilt or shame for being the child of an incarcerated person not only by members of the community, but also by members of their own family (2011). The benefit of openness and honesty with the child about the parent's incarceration can help the child understand that they were not purposefully abandoned.

While the evidence that would suggest parental incarceration has a negative effect on cognitive development in children appears substantial, there are studies, however, that remain inconclusive on the subject. Murray and colleagues reported that an obvious increase in antisocial behavior was evident, even with pre-parental-incarceration controlled for, in children of an incarcerated parent where ten percent more likely to develop antisocial behaviors (2012). They were unable to, however, ascertain any significant correlation between children having an incarcerated parent and developing a mental health disorder, illicit drug use problem, or educational performance issue. An argument could be made that antisocial behavior is a symptom for a wide range of other disorders, some of which are cognitive in nature. From possibly the most obvious, antisocial personality disorder, to the most famous, psychopathy, the overwhelmingly significant correlation between parental incarceration and antisocial behavior found in the meta-analysis by Murray, Farrington, and Sekol could point to just one symptom of many in an array of cognitive disorders.



Discussion

The scope of this study analyzed the relationship between having an incarcerated parent and the child's ability to perform academically. While these variables are predicted to illustrate a substantial negative relationship, the incorporation of other demographic data in the future may be of use in pin-pointing specific groups that may be affected by having an incarcerated parent. Demographic data such as age, race, and gender should be considered in addition to parental incarceration to determine the population most at risk of developing poor academic cognition. Additionally, the relationship between the individual subsections of the test and whether a parent is incarcerated or not may provide a deeper understanding of what subjects children of incarcerated parents have a higher tendency of struggling with. Importantly, the negative relationship that is expected from this study may have the potential to identify a portion of the population that struggles academically. The possession of such information could lead to the development of programs designed to assist children of incarcerated parents with their academics, so that the cycle of imprisonment is ceased, and the prisoner disparities are eliminated.

Results

If a student did not complete a section, the data associated with their subject number will be discarded due to lack of completeness. The scores of the incarcerated parent group and non-incarcerated parent group will be compared via a one-tailed t test to assess for significance in the negative direction. It is expected that a statistically significant negative relationship will be discovered when comparing the scores for each group. These results imply that having a parent incarcerated from ages of eight to fourteen might have negative effects on a child's academic cognition. However, there is a possibility that the data will not show a negative relationship between having a parent incarcerated and a child's academic abilities. If this should be the case, then academic shortcoming has the potential to be ruled out as a possible contributor to the increasing rates of incarceration and even imprisonment disparities.

Methods

Subjects

The individuals utilized in this study will be of varying ages ranging from students in the third grade to the eighth grade, which is roughly ages eight to fourteen. In order to effectively test the hypothesis of this study, there must be a portion of the students that have at least one parent that is incarcerated in conjunction with students that have never had a parent that was incarcerated. To achieve such a diverse sample, an urban population would be ideal. Therefore, the assessment will be administered to students within grades three through eight of the Columbus, Ohio public school system.

Apparatus

The assessment given to these students will be designed after a test that most, if not all, of the students involved in the study should be familiar with, the Ohio Achievement Assessment. This test determines a student's proficiency in the fields of mathematics, reading, writing, science, and social studies. The students will be separated into groups designated as incarcerated parent and non-incarcerated parent by a single question at the end of the test which asks the student if they currently have a parent that is in prison. To aid in administration of the examination and analysis of the data, the test will be provided via a computer application, a technology which most students should be familiar. The results of the tests taken by children of incarcerated parents will be compared to the tests taken by those individuals who did not have a parent in prison.

Procedure

The proposal will be pitched to the appropriate administrative staff of the Columbus, Ohio public school system for the previously specified grades to obtain permission from the school to provide the prepared computer-based test to the students. If granted permission, dates of test administration will be determined cooperatively with the researchers and the teaching staff so that the test may be administered during the normal school day. The legal guardians of the children will be informed of the purpose of the study and will have the opportunity to exclude their child from taking the test. The test will be proctored by the students' respective teacher to assure consistency. As compensation, the children that participate in the study will be invited to partake in a pizza party. This study is of low risk in that there is no additional physical risk associated with the completion of the test that would also not be present while the child is taking any other test at school. In order to protect the children's identities, the data obtained by their test scores will only be associated with a subject number. There is the risk that the child may have a negative reaction to identifying themselves as the child of a parent in prison. A child psychologist will be present to address any issues that may arise. After the children have completed the test, an overall score will be calculated by taking the number of questions a student answered correctly, dividing that by the total number of questions, and subsequently multiplying by one hundred. This will provide a percentage of correctly answered questions on the test. Those scores will be associated with the subjects' number and then they will be separated into incarcerated parent and non-incarcerated parent groups.



References

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