Evaluating the School Performance of Elementary and Middle School Children of Incarcerated Parents

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Abstract

Children of incarcerated parents are at an increased risk of negative long-term outcomes. With about 1% of the adult population incarcerated, the United States has millions of children at risk for these negative affects. Although research on children of incarcerated parents is increasing, it is still unclear whether they are at an increased risk for poor school performance as a specific result of parental incarceration. Thus, the purpose of this study is to evaluate the impact of parental incarceration on children, particularly on school performance. This study is unique from recent literature because it investigated (1) trends in the level of school performance among children who are affected by parental incarceration and (2) barriers that make it difficult to study this group.

Introduction

Children of incarcerated parents are perhaps the greatest casualty of war in the fight against Drug and Crime over the past two decades. The emphasis placed on stringent and harsher practices has had a detrimental effect. These children are vulnerable to a number of issues that increase their risk for poor academic performance. Educational treatments have been limited and special support is needed for these children. The children of the incarcerated are at a disadvantage due to the stress that is associated with their social and economic environment. Increased societal and cultural training could be provided to all educational systems in order to help children of the incarcerated gain a better understanding and knowledge of the effects of a number of issues. Hence the following two research questions were investigated:

1. What factors present in the lives of children with incarcerated parents, particularly parental incarceration significantly predict poorer individual school performance during elementary and middle school years?

Methodology

Accessing children of prisoners for research purposes can be difficult due to privacy concerns. A number of partnerships with the following key organizations were established in order to obtain the necessary data for the study:

• Community-based organizations
• Local police departments
• Juvenile justice organizations

A study sample was identified through a well-established, local community organization which had a previous program specification for children of prisoners. As well, a research program for children at risk of incarceration was established. Although, as well as access to a very similar group of children living in the same area, the following data was collected and obtained for competitive analysis. Although achieving high participation was still a challenge, some families were able to participate and the data set was previously established with the community organization.

A cross-sectional survey was designed, as well as, consent to access school records, local nonprofit and for-profit supporters, and local stakeholders had to be established in order to obtain the necessary data for the study. These stakeholders included community organizations, local police departments, and local nonprofits. The children of the incarcerated were then able to participate in the mentoring program and this research study (and this research program) and this resulted in a number of partnerships helping to improve the status of this particularly vulnerable population of children. The researchers had to overcome many obstacles in order to conduct this research.

Results

Research Question 1

The most prominent model explained 25% to 31% of the variance in TAP scores and was significant in all years tested. It is represented as follows:

Age
Gender
Race
Disability
Economic Status
Parental Incarceration

doct data revealed the significant associations between the study group and the following independent variables:

Table 1: Correlation and bivariate associations between the study group and the following independent variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation Value</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>0.042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>0.029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Status</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Incarceration</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.075</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

The fact that poorer performance is observed in the study population when compared to a similar “at-risk” group, suggests a need for further research to investigate the impact of parental incarceration as compared to the group previously established. In order to access a traditionally “invisible” study population, the researchers had to conduct research on the children at further risk of receiving inadequate educational support within the community. The results allowed for the identification of new avenues for intervention that would benefit children of the incarcerated.

In summary:

• Several studies support the idea that the changing educational environment will not be enough. The increase in the number of incarcerated, but not in the effective educational support that is available, has the potential to negatively impact the children of the incarcerated.

• The children of the incarcerated are more likely to experience emotional disturbances and/or a college degree. Again, caregivers may benefit from being linked with clinicians to provide emotional and mental support and therapy which would help them to improve their performance in school and beyond.

• The most parsimonious model explained 25% to 31% of the variance in TAP scores and was significant in all years tested. It is represented as follows:

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• The most parsimonious model explained 25% to 31% of the variance in TAP scores and was significant in all years tested. It is represented as follows:

TCAP Level of Performance = 0.23*Race + 0.32*School Mobility - 0.16 (Caregiver Education)