Using linked data to investigate developmental vulnerabilities in children of criminally convicted parents

Please do not take photographs of slides

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Background

• Family context long recognised as a critical influence on children’s early development
  – E.g. parental divorce, death, serious illness
  – Parental incarceration?

• Issue of growing importance
  – Highest imprisonment rate is for individuals of child-rearing age
  – Imprisonment rate of females increasing in Australia
Parental Incarceration

• Stressors for children
  – Disruption to care, living, and schooling arrangements
  – Stigma, bullying
  – Financial hardship
  – Psychological distress

• Currently no procedures to determine which offenders have dependent children

• No processes for ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children
Current Evidence

• ‘Hidden’ population
  – Limited quality evidence
  – Most research on fathers
  – Majority of participants are adolescents

• Increased risk of behavioural problems, social difficulties, school problems, and mental health and substance abuse difficulties
  – Impact of parental incarceration or family sociodemographic adversity?
Aims

• Using linked data...
  – Investigate developmental vulnerabilities in children of incarcerated parents
    • Compare to a group of children with convicted, but not incarcerated parents
  – Investigate whether the gender of the convicted parent is associated with differential effects for children
Strengths of Linked Data

• No requirement for individuals to disclose sensitive information
  – Limits reporting bias
• Large, representative samples for robust investigations
  – Identification of comparison groups
• Prospective collection of information
Limitations of Linked Data

- Only identify individuals who have been in contact with the agency/service
  - e.g., will not capture individuals engaging in criminal activity, who have not been charged
- No information on mediating/moderating factors
  - e.g., no measures of family and/or social support
- Causal relationships difficult to establish
Sample

Cohort
Born in WA
2009 AEDC data
(N=20,653)
49% Female
6% Aboriginal
Mean age 5.5 years

Exclusion criteria
Missing AEDC scores (n=382)
Multiple births (n=274)
‘Special needs’ (n=753)
Developmental disorder/Cerebral Palsy (n=41)
Parental deaths (n=132)

Final sample
N=19,071
19,071 mothers
18,323 fathers
Study Design

• Study period: 12 months prior to child’s birth, up to end of 2009
• 2009 AEDC scores merged with:
  – Parent corrective services data (WA Department of Justice)
  – Child, parent and neighbourhood sociodemographic characteristics (WA Department of Health; Department of the Attorney General)
• Outcome: children scoring in bottom 25% on a domain
• Three comparison groups
  – Parents who had been incarcerated
  – Parents who had served community-based orders only
  – Non-convicted parents and/or parents sentenced to fines only
## Covariates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child Aboriginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child speaks English as a second language</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maternal marital status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parental age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic remoteness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community socioeconomic disadvantage</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
• 1402 children (7%)
  – 555 mothers
  – 1089 fathers
• 242 children (17%) had two convicted parents
Demographic Characteristics

- Aboriginal
- Single mother
- Teen mother
- Living in remote area
- Living in disadvantaged area

Comparison: [Graph showing comparison]
Community Order: [Graph showing comparison]
Incarceration: [Graph showing comparison]
Parental Offending

↑50%

↑45%

↑32%

Physical Wellbeing

Social Competence

Emotional Maturity

Communication & General Knowledge

Language & Cognitive Skills

Odds of Developmental Vulnerability
Gender of Convicted Parent

Odds of Developmental Vulnerability

- Physical Wellbeing: ↑~50%
- Social Competence: ↑~50%
- Emotional Maturity: ↑~50%
- Communication & General Knowledge: ↑~50%
- Language & Cognitive Skills: ↑~60%

Legend:
- Mother only
- Father only
- Both parents
Conclusions

• Children of criminally convicted parents are broadly at risk of developmental difficulties
  – Over and above effects of socio-economic disadvantage
• No evidence of greater risk associated with maternal vs. paternal offending
  – Despite fathers being incarcerated at higher rates
• Children of convicted parents experience high levels of socio-demographic risk
Implications

• Addressing early developmental difficulties may help to mitigate later school problems

• Need to establish procedures for identifying offenders who are parents
  – Recognise criminally convicted individuals as a member of a family system
  – Supports also needed post-release
Recommendations

• These children constitute a particularly vulnerable, and currently underserved, group

• Development of targeted interventions required
  – E.g. Family case workers, parenting programs

• Appropriate resourcing to support children and families
  – Multi-agency responsibility

• Innovative approaches to engaging families will be essential
  – Range of potential obstacles
Acknowledgements

Co-authors
The people of Western Australia
For use of their administrative data

Data Linkage Branch, Department of Justice, and Data Custodians
For supporting the project, providing the data, and review of project outputs

Funding
Australian Research Council Linkage Grant (LP100200507)
LotteryWest
Australian Postgraduate Award (Industry)

Disclaimer
This material cannot be considered as either endorsed by the government departments involved in this research, or an expression of the policies or views of those departments. Any errors of omission or commission are the responsibility of the authors.

Australian Early Development Census
The Australian Government and State and Territory Governments are working in partnership with The Royal Children’s Hospital Centre for Community Child Health in Melbourne, the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, and Telethon Kids Institute, Perth, to deliver the AEDC. The Social Research Centre, Melbourne, is managing the AEDC data.