

## The Effects of Parents' Incarceration on Children at Hlaneki Village in Greater Giyani Municipality

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**ABSTRACT** The study assessed the effects of parents' incarceration on the well-being of children at Hlaneki village, Mopani district of Limpopo province, South Africa. Qualitative method was employed for the study and six participants were selected using snowballing sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured face to face interviews. The findings indicate that children of incarcerated parents are faced with physical, emotional, financial and psychological challenges in the absence of their parents. In the absence of their parents, children of incarcerated parents have become delinquents and are abusing drugs and alcohol among other substances. The study recommends that the government of South Africa come up with grants to safeguard the welfare of children of incarcerated parents. Furthermore, it is recommended that law makers come with policies which protect children from abuse by school authorities as well as by members of the greater society.

### INTRODUCTION

The incarceration of parents can affect many aspects of a child's life, including emotional, behavioural, well-being, family stability, and financial circumstances as well as academic and mental health. In the United States of America, the majority of incarcerated parents (99%) are fathers, although the number of women in prison and their percentage of the incarcerated population have both been growing leaving more than 7 million children vulnerable (Glaze and Kaeble 2016). According to Turney (2012) prison is not just bad for the emotional and physical health of inmates; it is also bad for the children left behind. Furthermore, Turney (2012) found significant health problems and behavioural issues associated with the children of incarcerated parents; in fact, parental incarceration may be more harmful to children's health than divorcing of parents or death of parents. There is consensus in the field that the children are exposed to many risk factors and variables which revolve around pre-incarceration living arrangements; the quality of the parent-child relationship; the degree to which inmate parents participated in daily care and financial support of their children prior to confinement; children's current living arrangements; the amount of contact children have with their incarcerated parents; and chil-

dren's age, temperament, gender and coping skills, among other factors (Turney 2012).

The effects of parental incarceration reach far beyond the cells of those behind bars, the children and families who are left behind are badly affected. In their systematic review of literature, Murray et al. (2012) examined evidence on the association between parental incarceration and children's later antisocial behaviour (for example, behaviours that violate societal norms and laws such as delinquency, juvenile arrest, persistent lying and deceit), mental health problems (for example, anxiety, depression), drug use, and educational performance. Murray et al. (2012) found that parental incarceration was associated with children's increased risk to antisocial behaviour, drug use, or poor educational performance but not mental health problems. Children with parents in prison are among the most vulnerable groups of children, and the impact on their rights and welfare remain largely unacknowledged in the criminal justice system of many countries in the world (Al Gharaibeh 2008).

There is mounting evidence that suggests that the breadth and depth of problems faced by children suggest a need for comprehensive, multilevel policy and practice to address the multiple family challenges that the children of incarcerated parents face (Eddy et al. 2010).

These strategies should focus on the financial, educational, occupational, health, and parenting issues that their families experience in their absence.

In search of such policies to cushion the children in the absence of their parents a number of countries which include India, Australia, Denmark and the USA to name but a few, have taken into consideration the plight of children of incarcerated parents into their justice delivery system by introducing an open prison system (Johnson and Easterling 2012). In Argentina, for example, since 2009 women with children aged fewer than five can be imprisoned at home, enabling them to continue caring for their children outside a prison environment. A similar situation exists in Germany where a “housewife’s sentence” means women who meet the conditions of so called open sentence leave prison during the day to be mothers and return to prison in the evening. These systems can prevent many of the negative implications of imprisonment, though it is important to examine the impact on the mothers and therefore also the children of this enforced lifestyle (DeHart and Altshuter 2011).

In South Africa, the constitutional court has acknowledged that when offending parents are found guilty, the sentence they receive will have profound impact on their children. However, in many jurisdictions the impact of proposed sentences on children is rarely taken into account, relying on individual judges or sentencing officials to consider it. There is wide variation between jurisdictions as to what must be or can be considered a relevant factor in sentencing; these variations have often had detrimental effects on the lives of innocent children. According to Mabusela (2014) in South Africa on the plight of children of incarcerated parents revealed that a lot of children are experiencing stressful events more especially if the incarcerated parent were the one providing them with food, shelter and income. The effects of parent’s incarceration can bring mental and economic stress to the children because they depend on that incarcerated parent. Children of incarcerated parents are forced by circumstances to grow faster than their peers because they have the responsibilities to take care of themselves and their siblings during their parents’ absence (Mabusela 2014). Similarly, findings from earlier studies by Murray et al. (2012) and Poehlmann (2010) indicate that youth with a history of parental incarceration were not only more likely than other youth

to be exposed to many parenting and family risk factors but were also at higher risk for poor adjustment across adolescence.

According to Article 30 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, children with a parent in prison are likely to face financial and material hardship, psychological damage and social stigma. Parental imprisonment can cause many problems for the family left behind, including difficulty organizing childcare, loss of family income, trouble maintaining contact with the imprisoned parent, stigma, and home, school and neighborhood moves. Children may respond by acting out or becoming withdrawn, anxious or depressed (UNICEF 2015). It is against this background of uncoordinated justice delivery system in South Africa on the welfare of children of incarcerated parents that this study assesses the effects of parents’ incarceration on children at Hlaneki Village in Greater Giyani Municipality. The number of parents being incarcerated (both men and women) is very high and children are left vulnerable and exposed to a number of social ills. This study aims to interrogate the plight of children of incarcerated parents with a view to recommend child friendly policies and strategies which safeguard the welfare of children in the absence of their parents.

### **Purpose and Objectives of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to explore how parents’ incarceration affected the children’s welfare, particularly on their emotional, social, mental, psychological, financial and educational needs.

The objectives of the study were therefore to:

- ◆ Investigate on how children are affected emotionally, educationally, mentally, socially and financially by the incarceration of their parents.
- ◆ Explore how parents’ incarceration can influence positive behavior of children into negative lifestyle.
- ◆ To recommend strategies to improve the situation of children of incarcerated parents.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

A research design is the approach to the study process, which involves the theoretical

basis to the collection and examination of the data (Salmah 2013). According to Baloyi (2011), a research design is a plan or agenda of how the researcher will conduct the study process that will determine solution to the phenomenon at hand. Exploratory research is defined as an investigation into a problem or situation which provides insights to the researcher. Exploratory research was used as it helped the study to understand the research problem, which is the effects of parent's incarceration on their children. The objectives and nature of inquiry influenced the selection of the qualitative approach. The study used a face to face interview technique to collect data. The types of interviews the researcher adopted were semi-structured and unstructured interviews. These allowed the researcher to observe or probe respondents (De Vos et al. 2011).

### **Study Population and Sample**

William (2011) defines a population as the total quantity of things which are regarded as the subjects of the study. The goal of qualitative research is to understand and enrich information about a phenomenon under consideration, it was therefore vital to select participants who are information rich and experienced on the phenomenon under investigation (Xolani 2010). The population of this study were parents who are in jail and those who have served their sentence. This study targeted both incarcerated parents and non-incarcerated parents since they both have firsthand information on the plight of children of incarcerated parents. The population for this study was drawn from parents from greater Giyani municipality in Limpopo province.

### **Sampling Procedure**

Sampling is a way of selecting objects or people derived from the population (Etikan et al. 2016). Sampling is the selection of specific data sources from which data are collected to address a determined problem (De Vos et al. 2011). The snowball sampling technique was used to select the study participants. This is a sampling procedure in which the sample elements are selected as they are identified by successive informants or interviewees (De Vos et al. 2011). This type of sampling technique works like a chain referral. After observing the initial sub-

ject, the researcher asked for assistance from the subject to help identify people with a similar trait of interest.

### **Data Collection Strategy and Analysis**

Data collection strategies includes the whole range of methods of collecting data such as, intensive interviews, observation of participants, large scale sample, primary and secondary sources, ethnography, randomized experiment, content analysis and other methods of collecting reliable evidence (De Vos et al. 2011). Data were collected at Hlaneki village in the Greater Giyani district. The study used interviews which involved face-to-face conversations (Babbie 2010). A face-to-face interview is a conversation between two or more people in which the interviewer collects data from the interviewee. Both semi-structured, also known as in-depth interviews and unstructured interviews were used to solicit data from the sample. The types of questions used in the study were open-ended questions. These are questions that lead people to think critically and analytically because they stir discussions and debate. The researcher interviewed six people at Hlaneki village. The researcher took notes and wrote the answers from the participants to ensure that accurate data was captured and stored.

Data were analyzed qualitatively through content data analysis. Content data analysis refers to a systematic approach to qualitative data that shorten the whole range form of data into a simple and understandable way (Creswell 2013). Content analysis refers to the analysis of books, brochures, transcripts, news report, visual video, written document (De Vos et al. 2011) in order to summarize data. Through content analysis data were broken down into manageable units and read many times to see themes emerging. These themes were then used to answer the research questions culminating into findings of the study.

### **Data Trustworthiness and Quality Control Measure**

In order to ensure credibility of the findings of this study, first and foremost the interview schedule was pilot tested among a small group of people with similar characteristics of the actual sample and all the loopholes identified were

attended to, to make the instrument efficient. Secondly the same questions on the interview schedule were asked the participants and this allowed data triangulation as participants gave comparable data, thus achieving data comparability and transferability. The one-on-one interviews held with study participants allowed the interviewer to observe non-verbal cues of the interviewees as a way of quality assuring the authenticity of the data given by the participants. Furthermore, the fact that the interviews allowed probing and rephrasing of questions allowed the study to collect clean data. The interviewees were also free to speak in the language of their choice which made their expressions easy as compared to a situation where a foreign language is used. Member checking was achieved through inviting study participants to examine and check the data they had provided to confirm that the report contained their undiluted views. Finally, transferability of the findings was ensured through comprehensive presentation of thick descriptions, in-depth discussion and contrasting them with findings from other studies.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Research ethics refers to the moral principles that guide the research (Kruger et al. 2013). It is a way of conducting a research and following appropriate research methodology (Wiles et al. 2012). It is about ensuring good conduct by the researcher and respecting the participants' personal matters and include such aspects as voluntary participation, confidentiality and informed consent. Research ethics protect both the researcher and the participants from any harm, either physically or emotionally.

### **Informed Consent**

Informed consent is the state of informing the participants about the purpose of the study, methods, risks and benefits of the study (Kruger et al. 2013). Informed consent includes information about the nature, extent, and duration of the participation in the research. According to De Vos et al. (2011), obtaining informed consent implies that all possible or adequate information on the goal of the investigation and the procedures that will be followed during the investigation. The study participants were informed about

the study and were allowed to ask questions so that they get clarity on what they are getting themselves into and could withdraw, if they felt withdrawing, they were free to do so.

### **Avoidance of Harm**

The basic ethical rule on the research is to avoid causing harm to participants (Kruger et al. 2013). The researcher must not cause physical or emotional harm to participants (De Vos et al. 2011). On social research, harm can be caused in an emotional way. This happens during interviews whereby the researcher may cause emotional harm unintentionally. The researcher avoided causing any emotional or physical harm to participants.

### **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality refers to non-exposing information about participants of the study to any individuals (Xolani 2010). Every individual has the right to privacy of information unless the person decides to when and to whom information will be revealed to (De Vos et al. 2011). The study adhered to this ethical aspect by informing the participants and ensuring that information provided by participants was to be safely stored and never shared with other people. According to Xolani (2010), anonymity means that no one, including the researcher should be able to identify any subject afterwards, hence in this study participants' identity was not disclosed instead pseudo names were used to disguise their identity.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Literature Control**

The findings of the study on the effects of parents' incarceration on children are presented and discussed as shown below:

#### ***Financial Effects of Children of Incarcerated Parents***

The study revealed that parents' incarceration affected their children financially and educationally. The study further found that some children of incarcerated parents are facing fi-

nancing challenges in raising money for educational needs hence are dropping out of school. One of the participants complained, *"My sons dropped out of school and they are roaming on the streets because there is no one who can pay their school fees."* It is now feared that the children's financial crisis might push them to join gangsters involved in crime since they are no longer gainfully engaged. Geller et al. (2011) found that financial hardships can occur regardless of the status of the parent at the time of their incarceration, suggesting that a change in a parent presence is a significant but not necessary condition for children to be suffering financially due to parent incarceration.

#### ***Effect of Parental Incarceration on Children's Education***

The study revealed that parents' incarceration has a negative effect on children's schooling activities. It was reported that children of incarcerated parents are struggling to concentrate in class because their thoughts are always with the fate of their parents in jail. It was also revealed that children of incarcerated parents are missing classes when they visit their parents in jail during school hours. Besides losing precious learning time visiting parents in prison, study participants indicated lack of school uniforms and other educational essentials and that children also face abuse by their peers and teachers. One participant indicated that: *"Children of incarcerated parents have dropped out of school because their friends and teachers are teasing them about their parent's criminality, this is really sad because their future has drowned in the drain because of what they did. They are always bunking classes because they are afraid of being mocked and this makes them to fail at the end of the year and they are no longer concentrating on their school work."* According to Poehlmann (2010) school performance is extremely important for children to succeed, but quite often when parents become incarcerated school achievement decreases. Single parents, grandparents, other kinship caregivers, and foster parents can have trouble when trying to meet the needs of children of incarcerated parents who are in their care. Consequently, the children of incarcerated parents' school performance are negatively affected with some children totally abandoning school altogether.

#### ***Maintenance and Caring of Children of Incarcerated Parents***

The study found that the fate of children of incarcerated parents is determined by factors such as the age of the child when separated from their parent, whether the incarcerated parent was the breadwinner or not, was the child from a single parent and the ability of care givers/grand/foster parents to fend for the child. The worst affected children are those who lost bread winners and those left with caregivers. Most of the caregivers are depending on old age grant which cannot satisfy the needs of the children of incarcerated parents. The study also revealed that few of the participants left their children with their partners who are working because they were married. One of the participants had so to say:

*"I am married and my husband is working, so he is the one who is taking care of my children and their financial needs are well catered for, they cannot complain about anything at all, they only miss the mother's love."*

The study revealed that children from single mothers go to live with grandparents when the mother is incarcerated and their situation is always dire as they (grandparents) don't have enough money to maintain them. One of the respondents said that:

*"My children are in the care of their grandmother, they are depending on her pension which is not enough because she has to maintain my siblings as well, and I find this stressing me and my children as well because their needs are not met. I am not comfortable with the situation but I cannot do anything because I am in prison."*

Murray et al. (2012) have theorized that children in foster care are at higher risk for homelessness, mental disorders, and incarceration in adulthood.

#### ***Maternal or Paternal Incarceration - What are the Children's Experiences***

The research revealed that there are differences in experiences between losing a mother compared to losing a father due to incarceration. Most children who have a father incarcerated live with their mother, which means no meaningful changes in housing, family/household chores, school and environment but however, a

child with a mother in prison is more likely to experience emotional stress because he/she has to take the role of the parent in taking care of his/her siblings which could be very stressful. One female participant was quoted as saying: *"I have three children, two boys, one aged seventeen and another one six years and a daughter aged nineteen years. I was sentenced in 2015; I left my children in the care of my siblings who are not working. I am worried that my children are suffering because I was able to provide food for them and also giving them hope and love that one-day things will be fine. I feel like I am a bad mother because mothers are the one who give children smile and full support unlike fathers, I failed my children."*

The majority of participants indicated that, parents are the role models to their children and this means that if children grow up with incarcerated parents, this can mean that a child is more likely to end up in jail. Geller et al. (2011) indicates that a child with an incarcerated mother is approximately five times more likely to end up in foster home or agency than when a father is incarcerated.

#### ***Behavioral Effects of Children with Incarcerated Parents***

The study reported that parents' incarceration can change their children's positive behavior into negative behavior. Children of incarcerated parents end up abusing drugs and alcohol for them to forget that their parents are in jail, consequently leading to committing crime and prostitution so that they can put food on the table for their siblings. One participant had this to say, *"My elder child told me that she is no longer staying at home because she is a prostitute and she is doing all this because she wants to close the gap that I left in the house, she doesn't want to listen to anyone and she blames me for everything she is doing. This is sad; I feel responsible for this entire situation. Children are traumatized with the situation created by myself. I feel ashamed and bored due to the challenges my children are facing."*

Another respondent said: *"It was reported to me that my son is abusing alcohol and drugs and it has pushed him to rape his cousin because he was drunk. He was a good boy who was not smoking but because of stress and shame that I put on them, they are taking drugs."*

Shlafer (2009) contend that children of incarcerated parents experience isolation and stigma as a result of their parents being in jail. Participants also reported that their children are being abused emotionally because of their parents' sins, children are no longer enjoying when they play with their peers because they are called by names such as "children of criminals".

#### ***Social Stigma and Emotional Effects of Children of Incarcerated Parents***

The study revealed that depending on which parent is incarcerated, there are many emotional and social effects in a child's life. The study participants reported that having a mother incarcerated has a bigger impact on children than having a father incarcerated. Many of the participants stated that stigma is everywhere in the community, among peers, in their own extended family, and this stigma causes feeling of shame and low self-esteem among children. One of the participants had this to say about the stigma children go through; *"The trauma to which children may be subjected to because of parental incarceration can be further increased by the uncertainty and disruption that often affect them as families attempt to adjust to the loss of a caregiver and primary income provider."*

The study revealed that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to have poor emotional and social behaviour. Children experience disruptions in their bonding when a parent is incarcerated and as the child subsequently enters foster care. These disruptions could cause different reactions in their behaviour and their emotional development depending on their age and other circumstances. One of the study participants stated that: *"My children are crying so hard every time they visit me and this gives them problems of coping with their mother's absence, they have flashback of traumatic events related to my arrest. Sometimes they are defiant and aggressive and they display anti-social behaviour because of me being in prison. They also told me that, one of the young girls has been raped by an unknown man in the absence of the siblings, it hurts me a lot, but I cannot do anything as I am in prison."*

Parental incarceration can affect children's emotional and social development through the trauma experienced because of parent-child separation (Eddy and Poehlman 2010). According

to Phillips et al. (2010), children whose parents are incarcerated are developing hatred to their parents because of not taking care of them and children's reaction are sometimes caused by the relationship that they had with their parents before incarceration.

### ***Abuse of Children due to Parental Imprisonment***

The study also revealed that children who are staying with caregivers have been abused and this make them run away from home, making sure that they survive the abuse by staying away from their family members. Children of incarcerated parents are physically and emotionally abused by their caregivers' due to their stress of failing to meet their daily needs. One of the study participants complained thus: *"My children are roaming on the streets because they don't want to move in with their caregivers, they even tried to commit suicide but they failed, they just want something that will make them to survive without asking help from their caregivers."*

According to Miller (2006), children of incarcerated parents live their lives depending on the influence they got from their parents and their caregivers, the more the community is raising insult and judgment on children of incarcerated parents, the more they influence these children to violate the law. Similarly, Huskey and Tomczak (2013) posit that children don't feel comfortable when they are left in the care of strangers, some children don't have choice of whom they want to stay with, but they are forced by their parents to stay with the relatives their parents preferred.

### **CONCLUSION**

The study assessed the effect of parents' incarceration on children at Hlaneki Village in the Greater Giyani Municipality. It focused on finding out how parents' incarceration affected children on financial, educational, behavioural and emotional spheres. The study revealed that children of incarcerated parents are faced with physical, emotional, financial psychological challenges in the absence of their parents. The study also revealed that children of incarcerated parents have lost out on education since their caregivers or foster parents are unable to provide for their educational needs especially fees and

uniforms. Hence, some of them are performing poorly while others have completely abandoned school due to lack of support. It was also reported that children of incarcerated parents are being emotionally and physically abused by a greater part of society which includes foster parents, teachers and their peers both inside and outside school. They are being labeled children of criminal parents and are finding it difficult to interact and socialize with other children at school and in the greater community. In the absence of their parent's children of incarcerated parents have become delinquents abusing drugs and alcohol among other substances as coping strategies but the influence of substance abuse has pushed some of them into criminal activities.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In light of the above findings the study recommends that:

Society should be taught about giving children of incarcerated parents enough support, if the society can stop stigmatizing these children by judging their parents. Communities work together with government to feed these children to decrease the negative impact that these children are likely to experience. The South African policy makers should protect children of incarcerated parents by coming up with policies which allow children to choose the caregiver they would like to remain with. The South African Government should offer social grants to children of incarcerated parents to cater for their needs in the absence of their parents. Children of incarcerated parents must be given access to touch, hug and kiss their parents during visitation periods whenever they feel like doing so in prison because this can help the relationship between parents and children to be strong and they can be able to bond. Future researchers should investigate more on financial crisis that are faced by children of incarcerated parents and this study must be funded by children's office so that the right of children can be protected. The researcher should also be able to identify the specific measures that could be introduced to assist children affected by incarceration.

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