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## Mum's the Word

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# Chapter

# 6

## General discussion



## 6.1 Introduction

This dissertation focused on the well-being and psychosocial functioning of children of incarcerated mothers from a developmental perspective. The research questions were based on the assumption that the functioning of children cannot fully be explained by taking only maternal incarceration into account. Multiple, interacting factors are likely to be involved. The bio-ecological systems theory was used as a holistic framework to select the most relevant and promising topics for empirical research.

It was expected that aspects of the caregiving situation are especially important in studying the children's well-being and psychosocial functioning. First, researchers showed that mothers were most often the primary caregivers of their children before incarceration (Cunningham & Baker, 2003; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Loper, Carlson, Levitt, & Scheffel, 2009). As a consequence, the caregiving arrangement of children is likely to change considerably after incarceration, and for many children the first caregiving arrangement after incarceration of the mother will probably not last for the whole incarceration period (Johnston, 1995; Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, & Kennon, 1999). However, an instable caregiving situation may also *precede* the mothers' incarceration (Myers et al., 1999; Ross, Khashu, & Walmsley, 2004; Phillips, Burns, Wagner, Kramer, & Robbins, 2002; Siegel, 2011). An association between caregiving instability and psychosocial functioning has been assumed but not demonstrated for children of incarcerated mothers (Dallaire, 2007; Myers et al., 1999). To determine whether incarceration causes risk in and of itself or serves as a marker for heightened risk exposure, knowledge is needed on caregiving instability both prior to and after the start of the mothers' incarceration.

Second, the incarceration most probably results in incarcerated mothers having to share their parenting responsibilities with others. This is named *coparenting*, a concept defined by McHale and his colleagues (2002) as "an enterprise undertaken by two or more adults who together take on the care and upbringing of children for whom they share responsibility" (p. 192). Studies on families of incarcerated mothers found support for the importance of the quality of the coparenting interaction (characterized by for example solidarity and support between caregivers) and children's functioning (Baker, McHale, Strozier, & Cecil, 2010; Cecil, McHale, Strozier, & Pietsch, 2008). However, it has not been studied whether there is an association between maternal incarceration and coparenting interactions and quality.

As such, this dissertation aimed to study the relationship between the well-being and psychosocial functioning of children of incarcerated mothers, maternal incarceration, and the caregiving situation.

In this general conclusion, a brief overview of the empirical studies is presented. The main findings of the studies are summarized and discussed. A bioecological framework is used, that regards individual factors (age and gender) and proximal (near) factors and processes (separation from incarcerated mother, caregiving instability and coparenting) in an attempt to gain knowledge on the psychosocial functioning of children of incarcerated mothers. This is followed by a discussion of the methodological strengths and limitations of the studies. Subsequently, implications for theory and research, as well as for decision-making and practice are outlined. Finally, a general conclusion of the dissertation is given.

### **The purposes of the empirical studies**

The dissertation comprised four empirical studies. A mixed qualitative/quantitative methods approach was used. The studies that were reported in Chapter 2 and 4 were based on a sample that included information on children of incarcerated mothers (the CIM-NL study). The studies that were reported in Chapter 3 and 5 also included an additional sample of children whose mothers served a community sentence that was used as a comparison group.

Chapter 2 reports on the variance in well-being and psychosocial functioning of children of incarcerated mothers, against the background of different caregiving arrangements. Chapter 3 reports on the relationship between children's psychosocial functioning and maternal incarceration. The effects of age and gender on children's functioning were considered and the study design and analysis plan controlled for offense type of the mothers and background characteristics of the families. The association between the mothers' imprisonment and children's problem behavior was investigated by comparing children of incarcerated mothers with children whose convicted mothers had not been imprisoned. This enabled us to diminish the plausibility of alternative explanations for children's deviant psychosocial functioning that previous studies reported. Chapter 4 focuses on the association between maternal incarceration and caregiving instability, by studying changes in primary caregiver and residence both before and starting from the mothers' incarceration. Moreover, the nature and context of caregiving instability were examined. Chapter 5 addresses the association between maternal incarceration and coparenting interactions and quality. We distinguished different types of caregivers in studying coparenting interactions and the quality of the mothers' coparenting behavior. To our knowledge, this is the first study that included a comparison group in studying coparenting in families of incarcerated mothers, which enabled us to put the findings in perspective of other risk factors for maladaptive coparenting (such as low income, parents living apart, but see McHale, Waller, & Pearson, 2012) that might be present in families of incarcerated mothers (Menting, 2012).

## **6.2 Summary and conclusions of the main findings**

The first study (Chapter 2) set the stage for further examining children of incarcerated mothers' outcomes within a bio-ecological framework. According to the mothers, caregivers, and children, the incarceration affected the children's functioning in several life domains, including the home environment but also at school, and in their contacts with peers. Difficulties in maintaining contact were mentioned as an important contributor to children's decreased well-being. Visiting was often difficult to arrange because of logistical problems. Moreover, for many children visiting the prison setting made a very strong impression or was even intimidating, and children had difficulties understanding the rules, such as restrictions on physical contact with their incarcerated mothers.

The study showed that children had complex and varying problems. Universally children reported sadness because of their mothers' imprisonment. Age seemed to make a difference in how they experienced this sadness. In general, young children reported missing their mothers, whereas older children's emotions were multifaceted. Apart from missing their mothers, there were sometimes feelings of anger for what had happened to them or fear of being teased or bullied because of their mothers' imprisonment. Some of these older children experienced the temporary separation from their mothers as an opportunity to gain control over their lives. This finding corresponds with prior research of Giordano (2010) that showed that some children qualified the maternal incarceration period as a relatively stable period. Our findings imply that studying the effect of age in the association between maternal incarceration and children's psychosocial functioning is important.

Mothers and caregivers reported strongly elevated levels of problem behavior in the children, compared to a normative population. However, this first study could not reveal whether this was related to the mothers' incarceration. Menting and her colleagues (2012) provided the only other study that addressed psychosocial functioning of children of incarcerated mothers in the Netherlands. They found that children of incarcerated mothers had more behavior problems than children from disadvantaged neighborhoods. They also found that children of incarcerated mothers had experienced more negative life events than these comparison children and found an association between prior life events and some types of problem behaviors (Menting, 2012). Given the commonalities between the two sets of findings, it appears important to unravel the effect of incarceration on children's functioning from other risk factors.

The current study also showed that the caregiving situation of children was diverse. There was a great variety in caregivers, including fathers, kinship caregivers and foster caregivers. A sizeable proportion of the children (40%) was not living

with their mothers prior to incarceration, which implies that for many children disruptions in the caregiving situation had occurred already before the incarceration. Based on these findings as well as findings in the wider literature (Myers, 1999; Philips et al., 2002; Ross et al., 2004; Siegel, 2011; Tasca, Rodriguez, & Zatz, 2011), it can be argued that more research is needed on the association between maternal incarceration and the caregiving situation.

### **Individual risk factors**

The findings suggest that age is an important factor in studying the divergent development of children of incarcerated mothers, as internalizing and externalizing problems were associated with being older (Chapter 3). This not only applied to children of incarcerated mothers, but also to children of criminally involved mothers who served their sentences in the community. This can be positioned within a developmental perspective that assumes canalization (i.e. “the tendency of many developmental processes to unfold in highly predictable ways under a wide range of conditions”, Seifert & Hoffnung, 1997; Waddington, 1966, p. G-2). According to Gottlieb (1991), early exposure to harmful environmental influences can canalize the direction of future development in a negative direction. As a result, seemingly small deviancies in problem behavior, when compared to children in normative populations, may increase over the years. Accordingly, the children’s problem behavior cannot (only) be explained by a temporary negative reaction of having a criminally involved mother, but should be seen within a wider developmental context.

Boys and girls were not affected differentially by maternal incarceration (Chapter 3), which indicates that gender is not a major factor in psychosocial functioning of children of incarcerated mothers. This is not in line with some prior research that showed differences between boys and girls. However, these studies found the strongest indications for differences between boys and girls in delinquent behavior (Hanlon et al., 2005) and school outcomes (Cho, 2010; Hanlon et al., 2005), which are different aspects than the problem behavior scales used in this dissertation. Stanton (1980) found that older girls were more negatively affected by maternal incarceration with regard to self-esteem and antisocial behavior than younger girls and boys. However, the fact that our findings differ might be explained by differences in study design as Stanton (1980) did not include standardized measures. This was addressed in the current study by using the Child Behavior Check List (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001), one of the most widely-used standardized measures for problem behavior.

## Proximal risk factors

### *Mother-child separation*

This study shows that *social* problems in children were associated with the mothers' incarceration. Broadband internalizing and externalizing symptoms were not higher among children of incarcerated mothers than among children whose criminally involved mothers were at home when delinquency and involvement with the justice system was taken into account.

This research is one of the first to compare children of incarcerated mothers with a comparison group of children who were not separated from their criminally involved mothers (i.e. mothers serving a community sentence). Stanton (1980) provided the only previous study that made use of a comparison group of mothers on probation. She aimed to distinguish the effect of separation because of maternal imprisonment from other effects related to the mothers' criminal involvement. However, her study group and comparison group were not comparable on important background characteristics and some of the mothers on probation had histories of prior incarceration. We addressed these concerns in this current dissertation by controlling for background variables and by excluding mothers and children from participation who had ever been separated because of maternal incarceration.

The findings add to the discussion whether maternal incarceration has “positive, negative, or null effects” on children's divergent psychosocial development (see Wildeman & Turney, 2014, p. 1042). The current study suggests that social problems might be driven by maternal incarceration where others (internalizing and externalizing) might be driven by factors that often go along with incarcerated, but which also occur in families of parents who are criminally involved but not convicted of a prison sentence.

### *Caregiving instability*

Caregiving instability is believed to be an important factor in children's psychosocial development (Schuengel, Oosterman, & Sterkenburg, 2009). Therefore this study took into account changes in caregivers and residential changes. On average, this study showed that children of incarcerated mothers faced a new primary caregiver every three years. Also, they changed residence every two years, which is six times the national average (Chapter 4). Echoing Murray and his colleagues (2012), who suggested that we should “treat parental incarceration as a life event and use time-ordered data to examine its effects on children” (p. 262), we studied whether maternal incarceration was a risk factor or a risk marker for caregiving instability in the children's lives. We found evidence for both.



For many children, disruptions in the caregiving situation regularly occurred prior to incarceration. However, the incarceration set off an increase of changes in primary caregiver, on top of the change brought about by the incarceration itself. Almost every caregiver change was accompanied by a residential change. This is an important finding because literature suggests that residential changes affect multiple domains of functioning (Adam et al., 2002). Thus, children not only have to get used to new caregivers, changing family members who are living with them and a new home, but possibly also to a new school, friends or sport clubs (Tasca et al., 2011). Indeed, we already discussed that children indicated that their mothers' imprisonment impacts on multiple life domains (Chapter 2).

Nationally, this was the first study that examined caregiving instability in the lives of children of incarcerated mothers. Internationally, only Tasca and her colleagues (2011) used time-ordered data to examine caregiving instability both prior to and starting from the parental incarceration. They did so in a subgroup of delinquent children for whom negative outcomes had already become manifest. However, from an ecological perspective, it is unknown whether these children's negative outcomes and changes in the caregiving situation might have had a bi-directional effect. This current study focused on a more representative sample of children of incarcerated mothers, including both children with and children without problem behavior (Chapter 2). In that sense, this study fills a gap in existing knowledge by concluding that, although a causal relationship could not be tested, a temporal link is shown between incarceration and caregiving instability.

### *Coparenting quality*

A high quality coparenting interaction (i.e. characterized by mutual support and solidarity between caregivers) has been proposed as an important factor of the psychosocial functioning of children raised by multiple caregivers (Cecil et al., 2008). Ideally, the coparenting relationship should be of high quality not only when there is a direct interaction (i.e. when mother, caregiver, and child are all present; known as *overt* coparenting) but also when the interaction is indirect (i.e. when mother and child are together in the absence of the other caregiver, referred to as *covert* coparenting). However, the current findings suggested that imprisonment limits the mothers' possibilities to engage in coparenting interactions at all (positive nor negative). Incarcerated mothers perceived fewer interactions with the other caregivers and lower quality of coparenting behavior than mothers in the comparison group (Chapter 5). Strikingly, for one in four children it turned out that the incarcerated mothers perceived no coparenting interaction with the current caregiver. Coparenting interaction was also limited by the fact that in most cases, the mothers only perceived an indirect coparenting interaction, meaning that children

were restricted to allusions of the mothers about the other caregivers and did not experience situations in which they were in the presence of both their caregivers. Only a few mothers perceived both direct ‘overt’ coparenting interactions with the caregivers in the presence of the child and indirect ‘covert’ coparenting interactions. This finding warrants attention because the study also revealed that the quality of the mothers’ coparenting behavior is positively associated with the extent to which mothers perceive both overt and covert coparenting interactions.

Prior research was mainly restricted to coparenting relationships between incarcerated mothers and grandmothers who were often already involved in coparenting the children prior to the mothers’ incarceration (Baker et al., 2010; Loper & Novero-Clarke, 2013; Loper, Nichols, & Dallaire, 2014; McHale, Salman, Strozier, & Cecil, 2013; Strozier et al., 2011). However, the findings in Chapter 5 revealed that coparenting interactions are much more diffuse and diverse when a more representative group of caregivers is considered.

### **6.3 Methodological strengths and limitations**

The Children of Incarcerated Mothers in the Netherlands (CIM-NL) study has generated a rich dataset that includes information on children’s well-being in several life domains, standardized reports on children’s problem behavior, the caregiving situation, and coparenting relationships between the incarcerated mothers and the children’s caregivers. Moreover, studies in this dissertation included a comparison group of children whose criminally involved mothers were at home. The study design has several advantages in studying the well-being and psychosocial functioning of children of incarcerated mothers, whilst taking into account factors in the broader context that are likely to be involved. First, the mixed quantitative/ qualitative approach enabled to combine standardized measures with in-depth substantiation and nuance (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). Several life domains were discussed in the interviews. Therefore, qualitative depth contributed to placing children’s well-being in a broader context.

Second, where possible, data triangulation was used by recruiting mothers, current caregivers, and children. The use of multiple respondents revealed that incarcerated mothers are probably not the best informants about the well-being of the children and that information from various sources was complementary. Much existing research is solely based on incarcerated mothers’ reports on their children, thus running the risk to underestimate problems in children’s well-being and psychosocial functioning and to paint a one-sided picture.

Third, this is one of the first studies that compared children of incarcerated mothers to children whose criminally involved mothers were not separated from their children, which contributes to disentangling the effect of incarceration from other risks related to the mothers' criminal involvement.

Fourth, the representative sampling method (all women prisons in the Netherlands were included) and few exclusion criteria resulted in the inclusion of a very broad range of children who were affected by their mothers' incarceration. Existing studies often focused on subgroups of children of incarcerated parents. For example, children who were already involved in the criminal justice system themselves (e.g., Tasca et al., 2011), restrictions on gender (e.g., solely boys; Murray & Farrington, 2005, 2008b), restrictions on age (e.g., only children between 2 and 10 years old; Menting, 2012), children residing with maternal grandparents (e.g., Baker et al., 2010; Strozier et al., 2011), or children who had the opportunity to visit their mother (Menting, 2012). By using different study designs in this dissertation, we revealed the importance of encompassing child characteristics, the wide range of types of problem behavior, and the variety and difficulties in the caregiving situation, in studying the association between children's functioning and the maternal incarceration.

The flip side of the coin, however, is that our broad approach resulted in diverse subgroups that were examined in the different studies (e.g., a subdivision in different types of caregivers in Chapter 5). Because the CIM-NL study was already limited to a moderate number of participants, we may have been unable to detect small effects. Therefore, the findings need to be tested on a larger sample.

Another limitation may be the representativeness of the sample. Some mothers, caregivers and children refrained from participating, therefore the issue of selection bias cannot be ruled out. During the time of data collection, prisons did not register systematically whether inmates had children. Therefore it is impossible to state exactly what percentage of mothers responded. Some mothers were possibly not even invited for the introduction meeting because they did not inform the prison employees that they had children. Some mothers who came to the introduction meeting did not sign up for the study without giving specified reasons, making it impossible to assess whether they did not meet the inclusion criteria or declined to participate. The inclusion of register data in future study would be of great importance in order to obtain more information on non-response and to examine to what extent responders differed from non-responders on background characteristics.

A final limitation is that with the current study design we were not able to test a causal relationship between children's functioning, maternal incarceration, and the caregiving situation. Although we diminished the plausibility of alternative explanations by comparing children of incarcerated mothers with children whose criminally involved mothers were at home, and controlled for the mothers' offense

types and important background characteristics of the families, other factors might still (partly) account for children's deviant psychosocial functioning.

## 6.4 Implications

### Implications for theory and research

The findings in this dissertation confirm that the psychosocial development of children of incarcerated mothers cannot be understood by taking only maternal incarceration into account. Because factors in the caregiving situation -instability and coparenting interaction and quality- were associated with maternal incarceration, further research will have to provide more clarity on the extent to which these caregiving factors account for the relation between maternal incarceration and children's functioning. Moreover, child characteristics are important in the divergent psychosocial development of children. Specifically, we found evidence for the importance of age of the children.

The bio-ecological systems model could be used as a heuristic framework for future research, in which specific factors within this model are selected for further examination and findings could be interpreted in the context of other important factors. Because the findings revealed that social problems are negatively associated with maternal incarceration (Chapter 3), it is suggested to examine the children's relationships with peers and the community and to take children's functioning at school into consideration. Given the finding that children change caregiver frequently (Chapter 4), the revealed coparenting situation (Chapter 5) and caregiving arrangement (Chapter 2, 4, 5) are – in a sense - snapshots. In future research, changes over the lifetime have to be of explicit concern in further understanding the impact of incarceration and its related risk factors. This is theoretically captured in the so-called *chrono level* of bio-ecological models. This recommendation is in line with the conclusion of Murray and his colleagues (2012) that we should analyze change by treating parental incarceration as a life event.

A prospective longitudinal study design (e.g. a cohort study of children from disadvantaged neighborhoods, conform the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study, Princeton University & Columbia University) combined with register data (e.g., SES, residential moves, neighborhood information as derived from the Municipal Basic Administration (GBA)) is suggested for the following reasons.

First, this dissertation revealed that not only children whose mothers were incarcerated, but also children whose criminally involved mothers were at home have elevated levels of problem behavior. This suggests that scientific knowledge needs

to be widened by studying children of criminally involved mothers, irrespective of whether or not the mothers are imprisoned. A cohort study of children from disadvantaged neighborhoods would enable to examine the psychosocial development of children from both groups. This could provide more clarity about at which point and in what way maternal incarceration is a detrimental factor in the development of the children's psychosocial functioning. A longitudinal study will also provide information about the long term effects of maternal incarceration on children's functioning, as information about problem behavior could be obtained at different moments in time (i.e. before and during incarceration and after release).

Second, this dissertation showed the added value of distinguishing the effect of maternal incarceration from possible effects of the mothers' criminal involvement, by using a comparison group of children whose criminally involved mothers were at home. However, the dissertation revealed that a sizeable proportion of children whose mothers were incarcerated were not living with their mother prior to incarceration and mothers were not always consistently involved in caregiving prior to incarceration. The proposed prospective design would enable to control for such events when comparing children of incarcerated mothers with children whose criminally involved mothers are at home, thus providing more information about the singular effect of separation on the children.

Third, it is difficult to rule out the influence of factors in the exosystem, such as penal policies, regimes, and visiting possibilities, in studying the relationship between children's functioning and maternal incarceration. A cross-national comparable set-up, with countries that are roughly comparable on social welfare status, court procedures and programs, would have the advantage of considering penal policies, regimes, and visiting possibilities as extra components in disentangling the risks of maternal imprisonment on children's psychosocial functioning. In several Western industrialized countries, child- or family friendly visiting programs are (being) developed (Robertson, 2012). An additional methodological advantage of a cross-national study would be that combining international data generates a larger sample of this rare population.

### **Implications for policy and practice**

A number of findings are important for policy and practice. This dissertation showed that children of incarcerated mothers are particularly burdened by internalizing, externalizing, and social problems. Sadness is universal. Regardless of whether incarceration is a causal factor in this, these children constitute a damaged and vulnerable group. Comparison with children of non-incarcerated but criminal mothers showed that it is likely that some of the problems that these children face

are associated with their mothers' incarceration. Children of non-incarcerated but criminal mothers however also had elevated levels of problem behavior. As has been argued elsewhere (De Ruyter, Hissel, & Bijleveld, 2013), from the point of view of the well-being of these children, incarceration of their mothers - with its ensuing separation and increased instability - should therefore perhaps be used as the most ultimate remedy only. Having mothers do community service, the use of electronic monitoring, or even suspended sentences would prevent children from missing their mothers, which is reported by the (younger) children to be one of the most severe problems they experienced. Furthermore, it may prevent certain social problems, such as feeling lonely and being stigmatized because of their mothers' incarceration. It would also remove the need for children to visit prisons, which often made a strong impression or was even intimidating.

If mothers are incarcerated, their children's interests should be a leading principle in the execution of that sentence. Placing mothers in prisons geographically as close to their children as possible, is one example of this. Also, in organizing contact possibilities, the children's daily routine should be leading. For example, by giving children the opportunity to have phone contact with their mothers during certain key moments of the day, such as immediately after school or at bedtime. Weekend visits mean that children do not have to visit their mothers during schooldays. The design of visiting rooms should be conducive to contact that is as normal as possible.

The Dutch mother-child visiting days are a good example of child-oriented policies. During these days –organized by prison staff and non-governmental organizations- mothers and children have an opportunity to cuddle, play games and generally just spend time together. Such policies should however not be an add-on, organized by well-meaning volunteers and dedicated prison staff, but offered by the government that is responsible for executing sentences, to prevent or minimize collateral damage, as an integral part of the prison rules.

The execution of sentences should be adapted such that involvement of the mothers in the caregiving of their children is better facilitated. The studies in this dissertation showed that while organizing contact between mothers and children is already often compromised, there is hardly any possibility for mothers to interact with those who assume the daily care for their children. The quality of interaction between mothers and caregivers in the presence of the children is assumed to be an important factor in children's functioning (Cecil et al., 2008; McHale, 1997). However, apart from scarce unsupervised family visits, mothers, caregivers, and children are limited to the regular visits to have contact. These visits are generally time-limited, in large-scale visiting rooms with little privacy, and children and caregivers are physically separated from the mothers. Visiting programs should therefore be developed with specific attention for the inclusion of the caregiver, and visiting possibilities for the family unit of mother, caregiver and child, are a necessary improvement.

Parent training could support mothers in their parenting skills and when they resume the daily care when returning to the family. Menting (2012) showed that the parent training 'Better Start'; Menting, 2012) is an effective intervention for parenting behavior of the incarcerated mothers and led to benefits on children's disruptive behavior when compared to a no-intervention comparison group. This dissertation showed that in some families problems in the caregiving situation already took place before the incarceration period. Thus, the mothers' criminal justice involvement and subsequent incarceration is on the one hand a risk factor, but could also be seen as an opportunity or hook for change: incarceration may provide a unique setting for offering mothers and their families interventions. Such interventions could also be offered on a wider scale, namely also for mothers with non-custodial sentences.

## **6.5 General conclusion**

Children of incarcerated mothers are a vulnerable group with manifold problems. The maternal incarceration generally adds to pre-existing family problems. Maternal incarceration more often than not implies a disruption of the children's caregiving situation, in terms of changes in residence, changes of caregiver, and possibly changes of schools, clubs, and friends. A clear link was established between children's social problems and the maternal incarceration. Internalizing and externalizing problem behavior were associated with being older, which probably reflects the high-risk nature of the children. The incarcerated mothers have very little opportunity to co-parent with the caregivers of their children. While more research is needed into the mechanisms that generate negative outcomes in the children and the interventions that are most effective to aid them, prison policy should be geared towards the promotion of the mothers' parenting possibilities and the well-being of the children.