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Mum's the Word

A study on children of incarcerated mothers' well-being, psychosocial functioning, and caregiving situation

Sanne Hissel



Mum's the Word

A study on children of incarcerated mothers' well-being, psychosocial functioning, and caregiving situation

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Mum's the Word
A study on children of incarcerated mothers'
well-being, psychosocial functioning, and caregiving situation

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Sanne Catherina Elisabeth Maria Hissel

geboren te Heerlen

promotoren: prof.dr. C. Schuengel
prof.dr.mr. C.C.J.H. Bijleveld
prof.dr. P.H. van der Laan
copromotor: dr. M. Oosterman

| | | |
|---------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| leescommissie | prof.dr. J. Hendriks | Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam |
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Voor Olivier

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Chapter

1

General introduction

1.1 Introduction

“My little brother lives with his father and my sister with a friend of my mum. After my mum went to prison, we all lived together with an aunt of mine for a while. But she had children of her own so it was too much to take care of us as well. Besides, school started so we had to live somewhere from where we could go to school. That’s why I asked my brother’s father if my brother could live with him so that he could attend school. And my sister, well I don’t know exactly how that was arranged. She just went to friends of my mum.”¹

This is how a boy in this study explained how his caregiving situation changed when his mother got incarcerated. He is one of the millions of children worldwide, who have to deal with the incarceration of a parent (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Scientists and practitioners have stated that there are indications that children of incarcerated parents are among the most vulnerable children in society (Eddy & Poehlmann, 2010), which has been supported by an increasing body of literature assuming that these children have decreased well-being, including both emotional, behavioral and social problems (e.g., Dallaire, 2007; Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2011). The lion’s share of studies on children of incarcerated parents focused on children whose fathers were incarcerated or combined samples of incarcerated fathers and mothers (for a meta-analysis, see Murray et al., 2012a). This is not surprising given the much larger number of imprisoned fathers compared to imprisoned mothers (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), and therefore much larger number of children affected by paternal incarceration. As a consequence, much remains unknown about the effects of *maternal* incarceration on children’s well-being. However, it is often assumed that maternal imprisonment has a different and even more severe impact on children than paternal imprisonment because, on average, the emotional and psychosocial involvement of mothers with their children is greater than of fathers (Murray & Farrington, 2008a).

It can be expected that especially the caregiving situation is an important factor in explaining psychosocial functioning of children of incarcerated mothers. Incarcerated mothers are likely to have been the sole caregiver to their children before the incarceration (Cunningham & Baker, 2003; Dallaire, 2007; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Loper, Carlson, Levitt, & Scheffel, 2009; Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, & Kennon, 1999). Therefore, separation from the incarcerated mother might create instability in the children’s caregiving situation (Phillips, Erkanli, Keeler, Costello, & Angold, 2006; Tasca, Rodriguez, & Zatz, 2011). Although empirical evidence is

¹ Quotes in this dissertation are explicitly altered so that participants remain unrecognizable.

lacking, literature reviews have stressed the theoretical association between caregiving disruptions and decreased well-being in children of incarcerated mothers (Dallaire, 2007; Myers et al., 1999). Moreover, studies have found support for the association between the quality of the interaction between the incarcerated mother and the other caregiver (i.e. 'coparenting') and children's psychosocial functioning (Cecil, McHale, Strozier, & Pietsch, 2008). It remains however largely unknown to what extent mothers remain engaged in parenting the children while incarcerated.

Prior research showed that parental imprisonment was associated with antisocial behavior in children (Murray et al., 2012a) and predicted internalizing and externalizing problems in children over and above separation because of other reasons such as parental death or divorce (Murray & Farrington, 2005, 2008b). However, causal inference could not be tested (Murray et al., 2012a). Children of incarcerated parents may already be facing an increased number of risk factors in their caregiving situation prior to incarceration (Phillips, Burns, Wagner, Kramer, & Robbins, 2002), indicating that it is possible that they already had problem behavior prior to the incarceration. Thus, separation from the incarcerated mother and changes in the caregiving situation following the mothers' incarceration may not be the sole causes in explaining children's outcomes, and incarceration might also be a marker for heightened risk exposure rather than causing risk in and of itself (Murray & Farrington, 2005; Murray, Farrington, Sekol, & Olsen, 2009; Phillips et al., 2006). In conclusion, examining maternal incarceration in isolation from other factors may result in a false conclusion about its relative impact on children's psychosocial functioning (Siegel, 2011).

Aims of the dissertation

The current dissertation investigates the relationship between the well-being and psychosocial functioning of children of incarcerated mothers, the maternal incarceration, and the caregiving situation. A first aim was to describe the diversity in experiences of well-being and psychosocial functioning in children of incarcerated mothers against the background of different caregiving arrangements (Chapter 2). A second aim was to study the relationship between maternal incarceration and children's psychosocial functioning, and to examine the effect of age and sex on children's outcomes (Chapter 3). A third aim was to address the relationship between maternal incarceration and caregiving instability in these children's lives (Chapter 4). A fourth aim was to examine the association between maternal incarceration and the extent and form of coparenting in the families of the children (Chapter 5).

In order to better understand whether the psychosocial functioning of children and the extent and form of coparenting were attributable to separation from the

incarcerated mother or to other risk factors, the studies in this dissertation made use of a comparison group of children whose convicted mothers were at home (Chapter 3 and 5). Also, to better understand whether incarceration was a risk factor or a risk marker for caregiving instability, the caregiving situation was considered both prior to and after the start of the mothers' incarceration (Chapter 4).

1.2 Theoretical perspectives

The research in this dissertation is based on a developmental perspective on children's well-being and psychosocial functioning. Bronfenbrenner (1992, 2005) developed a bio-ecological systems theory for describing different environmental systems that may affect the children's development. This theory provides a framework for studying relevant characteristics and processes for the psychosocial development of children of incarcerated mothers. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems model (1992, 2005) is based on four key concepts in children's development: process, person, context, and time. Processes are considered as the primary mechanism in children's development; they are defined as enduring forms of interactions between the child and its immediate surroundings (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009).

However, the impact of such interactions also depends on characteristics of the child itself. Genetic disposition, biological characteristics (e.g., age, gender) and interpersonal factors (e.g., resilience) of children shape and are shaped by the impact of experiences on children's psychosocial development.

Moreover, children's development should be seen within the context of different environmental systems that directly or indirectly interact with the child, and that can be visualized as layers that surround the individual child. The most proximal environmental systems are the *microsystems*, such as interactions between children and parents, other family members, peers, or teachers. Interactions and relationships children have with their immediate environments are likely to bi-directionally interact with child characteristics and influence children's functioning. The next system level (*mesosystem*) represents the connections between two or more microsystems, such as the interactions between parents and teachers, which can also have a direct influence on the child's functioning. Apart from these proximal systems, Bronfenbrenner identified more distal environmental systems that are assumed to have an indirect influence on children's psychosocial functioning. These distal systems involve the relationship between environments in which the child does not have an active role and the immediate context of the child, such as the relationship between the parents' workplace and the home situation (*exosystem*) and cultural beliefs, norms, laws, and stereotypes (*macrosystem*), which might influence children's functioning because

these influence interactions within other system levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The different subsystems of the bio-ecological model are considered to be interconnected: changes or conflict at one level can affect the other levels.

Finally, the influence of time (*chronosystem*) is considered to be an important factor in how the child's functioning and the different ecological systems might change. Figure 1.1 is a graphic representation of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems model.

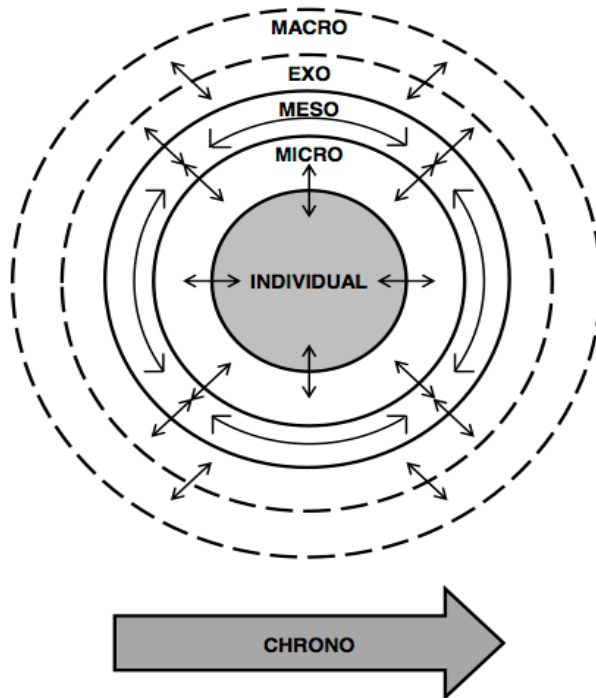


Figure 1.1. Bio-ecological systems model of child development. The individual child is represented in the middle of the figure; proximal systems are represented by a solid line and distal systems by a dotted line. Adapted from Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems model of child development (1992, 2005).

Development of children of incarcerated mothers in a bio-ecological framework

Based on the bio-ecological model, the functioning of children of incarcerated mothers cannot automatically be interpreted as a direct consequence of the incarceration, but will have to be examined in a larger context of different environmental systems that may negatively affect developmental processes. A number of possible factors and processes are discussed for each of the system levels.

Individual risk factors

Child characteristics such as age and gender have been mentioned by scholars as factors that could moderate the impact of parental incarceration on children's well-being (Hagen, Myers, & Mackintosh, 2005; Hanlon et al., 2005a; Murray & Farrington, 2008a; Murray et al., 2012a). Children of various ages may react differently to maternal incarceration, for example, because of the significance of disruptions in attachment relationships in a child's earliest years (Dallaire, 2007; Johnston, 1995; Poehlmann, 2005c; Van Nijnatten, 1998).

It is generally assumed that there are gender-based differences in coping with stress and emotional issues such as those that parental incarceration might cause. Girls more often show internalizing problem behavior whereas boys appear to show more externalizing problems (Bakker, Ormel, Verhulst, & Oldehinkel, 2010). Only a limited number of studies focused on gender-based differences in children of incarcerated mothers, but these have indeed found evidence that girls and boys are affected differently by maternal incarceration (Cho, 2010; Hanlon et al., 2005a; Stanton, 1980).

Alternatively, any association between parental incarceration and children's behavior problems may be explained by interpersonal factors such as resilience and by heritable dispositions for maladaptive behavior. This current dissertation investigated the effects of age and gender in studying psychosocial functioning of children of incarcerated mothers (Chapter 3).

Proximal risk factors

Mother-child separation

For those children who are living with their mother prior to incarceration, the incarceration will result in mother-child separation. A number of arguments can be given why mother-child separation caused by incarceration is an important topic in studying psychosocial development of children of incarcerated mothers. Firstly, the separation in itself might be traumatic for children and might affect their functioning (Murray et al., 2012a), especially if children are present at the arrest of the parent, if the imprisonment of the mother is unexpected, or if children are told confusing explanations about the whereabouts of their mothers (Braman, 2004; Van Nijnatten, 1998; Siegel, 2011).

Secondly, apart from traumatic separation, the incarceration complicates mother-child contact. It is difficult for children to maintain contact with their incarcerated mothers, as there are generally few women's prisons and hence travel distances are large. Also, children are restricted to visiting hours and phone calls to have contact

with their mothers (Codd, 2008; Murray & Farrington, 2008a; Myers, 1999; Siegel, 2011). Thus, separation might also disrupt emotional bonds between children and their mothers (Menting, 2012). According to *attachment theory* (Bowlby, 1969, 1973), parents are important for children as a source of emotional security. Children construct working models of their attachment relationships based on the quality of their interactions with the attachment figure as well as other attachment-relevant experiences. Separation from the mother therefore likely has an impact on children's attachment security. There is some evidence that children often have insecure relationships with their mothers and their caregivers during their mothers' imprisonment (Poehlmann, 2005c). A variety of meta-analyses have shown associations between insecure attachment and problem behavior in children (Barone & Lionetti, 2012; Fearon, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van IJzendoorn, Lapsley, & Roisman, 2010; Groh, Roisman, Van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Fearon, 2012). Thus, the separation caused by maternal incarceration might have an impact on children's psychosocial functioning via attachment insecurity.

Thirdly, separation from incarcerated mothers might deprive children from parental supervision, role modeling, and social support which, according to *social learning theory*, are important contributors to children's social capital (Hagen & Dinovitzer, 1999). From this socialization perspective, the maternal incarceration affects children's functioning via reduced maternal care and supervision (Murray et al., 2009). This current dissertation focused on whether the psychosocial functioning of children was associated with separation from the incarcerated mothers (Chapter 3).

Caregiving instability

Caregiving arrangements of children tend to change dramatically when mothers get incarcerated (Dallaire, 2007; Johnston, 1995; Myers et al., 1999; Tasca et al., 2011) and for the majority of children, the first placement after the mother's incarceration may not be the last (Johnston, 1995; Myers et al., 1999). Possibly, separation from the incarcerated mother impacts on children's well-being and development via disruptions in the caregiving situation (Dallaire, 2007; Myers, 1999). However, much is unknown about caregiving instability prior to maternal incarceration. This current dissertation examined whether caregiving instability in children's lives was associated with incarceration of the mothers (Chapter 4).

Coparenting quality

Most mothers were the sole caregivers before imprisonment. Therefore, the incarceration usually requires that other people step into the primary caregiver role and take over many of the parenting roles and duties. The shared responsibilities of

the mothers and caregivers and their commitment to parenting the child (referred to as *coparenting theory*, see Cecil et al., 2008) can vary in quality, which may impact on children's well-being (Cecil et al., 2008). Coparenting theory is part of *family systems theory* (McHale & Lindahl, 2011). Family systems theory is based on the assumption that the influence of the family on individuals "is greater than the sum of its parts" (Cox & Paley, 1997; p. 245). From this perspective, we should consider the family as hierarchically organized dynamic subsystems (Cummings, Davies, & Campbell, 2000). Incarceration might influence children's functioning via reduced quality of coparenting behavior. Therefore, this current dissertation examined the association between maternal incarceration and coparenting interaction and –quality (Chapter 5).

Distal risk factors

The studies in this dissertation focused on individual and proximal factors and processes in studying the well-being and psychosocial functioning of children of incarcerated mothers, in relation to their mothers' incarceration and their caregiving situation. Nevertheless, relevant distal risk factors are discussed to place the empirical studies of the dissertation within a larger bio-ecological framework.

Stigma

Children of incarcerated mothers are part of a broader sociocultural network in which people involved in the criminal justice system are largely stigmatized (Arditti, 2005; Arditti-Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003). It is generally known that stigma is spread from the stigmatized individual to family members (Goffman, 1963). In general, family members of incarcerated people struggle with lack of support and rejection (Arditti, 2005). In the case of children, mothers' incarceration might result in children being bullied and teased by peers (Boswell & Wedge, 2002). Shame and fear of stigma might cause children to remain silent about the incarceration of their parent and lead to feelings of loneliness (Braman & Wood, 2003). Stigma and social isolation might instigate the development of internalizing problems in the short and long term (Murray & Farrington, 2008b) as well as externalizing problems (Menting, 2012) in children of incarcerated mothers. Put succinctly, according to *stigma theory*, maternal incarceration impacts on children's emotional, behavioral and social functioning via stigma and social isolation.

Strain

Imprisonment often results in a loss of financial support, which may lead to financial hardship at home (Travis & Waul, 2003). The *general strain theory* (Agnew, 1992) is

much broader than classical strain theories (the theories of Merton, 1938; Cohen, 1955; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960) that link lack of monetary success and middle class status to criminal behavior (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Murray, Loeber, & Pardini, 2012). Agnew (1992) indicates that there are several sources of strain, such as the lack of positive stimuli. Also, general strain theory identifies several maladaptive ways to respond to strain, including both emotional and behavior problems and cognitive preoccupation (Broidy & Agnew, 1997). In prior research both economic strain and strain in the context of child care were suggested as mediators of the association between parental incarceration and children's problem behavior (Murray & Farrington, 2008a).

The influence of time

According to several researchers (e.g., Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Murray & Farrington, 2005; Murray et al., 2009; Phillips et al., 2006; Schlafer, Poehlmann, & Donelan-McCall, 2012), it is possible that children of incarcerated parents were already different from a normative population prior to the parents' imprisonment. This is called the 'selection perspective' (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999) and suggests that not the incarceration but other risk factors account for children's decreased psychosocial functioning. Therefore, researchers emphasized to analyze changes by treating parental incarceration as a life event (Murray et al., 2012b).

1.3 Research design

The data of the empirical studies were obtained from two samples. The sample of children of incarcerated mothers (CIM-NL Study) and a sample of children whose mothers were serving a community sentence. The latter served as a comparison group.

Children of incarcerated mothers in the Netherlands Study (CIM-NL Study)

The CIM-NL Study includes information on the well-being, psychosocial functioning, and caregiving situation of children of incarcerated mothers. It also includes information on the coparenting situation of families of incarcerated mothers. Information was obtained from incarcerated mothers, the caregivers of the children, and the children themselves.

Study recruitment and data collection took place in two waves between 2008 and 2012. The sample included children of convicted mothers from regular units and units with minimum security recruited out of all women's prisons in the

Netherlands. Psychiatric wards were excluded because of the vulnerability of women residing there. Through the prison staff, imprisoned mothers with children up to 18 years of age were invited to attend an introductory meeting where they could sign up for the study. Mothers who agreed to participate had to sign an informed consent, after which in-depth interviews were conducted and questionnaires were administered. If mothers gave permission, current caregivers of the children were approached for in-depth interviews and questionnaires as well. Children were also interviewed if, following the above, they agreed and both their mother and their current caregiver signed an informed consent form. Children aged twelve and over also signed an informed consent form. A setting was provided where respondents could speak freely and confidentially. For the incarcerated mothers this implied that the interview could be held in their cell, in a visiting room or office within the prison; children and caregivers were interviewed at home or – very exceptionally - in a public place. Interviews were administered by trained researchers.

During the first interview wave (2008-2010) conditions for participation were that mothers had to have children up to 18 years of age, the children had to reside in the Netherlands, and had to be aware that their mother was incarcerated. However, in the first interviews it became apparent that children residing abroad formed a considerable proportion of the children of mothers who were incarcerated in the Netherlands. As these children are obviously as important as children residing in the Netherlands, this exclusion criterion was no longer applied in subsequent study recruitment. In the second data collection wave (2011-2012) the coparenting questionnaire was included. Because the coparenting relationship of mothers and caregivers whose children were not aware of mother's imprisonment was also of interest, inclusion was extended accordingly. Children who were not aware of their mother's incarceration were not interviewed themselves.

The CIM-NL Study includes information on 255 children (55% boys, 45% girls) of 124 different mothers. For 81 children, the caregivers also participated in the research. Sixty-two children participated themselves. Sample sizes for the empirical chapters vary due to inclusion of different subsamples. For more detailed information about these subsamples is referred to the separate chapters.

Children of mothers with a community service sentence

The comparison group yielded information on psychosocial functioning of 55 children whose mothers served a community sentence. Information was also obtained about the coparenting situation of families of mothers with a community service sentence. Coparenting information was obtained from 28 mothers.

Table 1.1. *Outline of the empirical chapters*

| | Chapter 2 | Chapter 3 | Chapter 4 | Chapter 5 |
|-----------------------------|--|---|--|---|
| Research Aim | To examine the variance in well-being and psychosocial functioning in children of incarcerated mothers against the background of different caregiving arrangements | To study the relationship between maternal incarceration and children's psychosocial functioning and to examine the effect of age and sex on children's outcomes | To address the relationship between maternal incarceration and caregiving instability in the lives of children of incarcerated mothers | To examine the association between maternal incarceration and the extent and form of coparenting in the families of the children |
| Research Questions | How is caregiving organized when mother is incarcerated? Are there any signs of internalizing and externalizing problem behavior? What is the well-being of the children and what are their perceptions, and experiences of the incarceration situation? | Did children of incarcerated mothers show heightened levels of internalizing, externalizing, and social problems compared to children whose mothers are convicted but not in prison? Were there differences in the effect of maternal incarceration by children's age and gender? | What is the number of changes in residence and primary caregivers for children whose mothers were incarcerated? What is the sequence of changes in residence and primary caregiver over time (i.e. comparing pre- and post-incarceration)? What is the nature and context of changes in residence and primary caregiver? | To what extent do coparenting relationships exist between incarcerated mothers and the caregivers of the children? Is the extent to which coparenting relationships exist associated with a) different type of caregivers, and b) maternal incarceration? Is the quality of the mothers' coparenting behavior associated with the extent to which coparenting relationships exist? Is the quality of the mothers' coparenting behavior associated with a) different type of caregivers, and b) maternal incarceration? |
| Research Design | Mixed qualitative/quantitative | Quantitative | Mixed qualitative/quantitative | Quantitative |
| Data Type of Informants | CIM-NL Study (N=68 children) <i>Incarcerated mothers</i> <i>Caregivers</i> <i>Children</i> | CIM-NL Study (N=167 children) <i>Incarcerated mothers</i> Comparison group (N=55 children) <i>Mothers serving a community sentence</i> | CIM-NL Study (N=65 children) <i>Incarcerated mothers</i> <i>Caregivers</i> <i>Children</i> | CIM-NL Study (N=105 children) <i>Incarcerated mothers</i> Comparison group (N=50 children) <i>Mothers serving a community sentence</i> |
| Instruments | In-depth interviews Child Behavior Check Lists | Child Behavior Check Lists | In-depth interviews | Coparenting Scales (modified version) |
| Concepts/Measured Variables | Well-being Internalizing problem behavior Externalizing problem behavior Total scale of problem behavior | Internalizing problem behavior Externalizing problem behavior Social problems | Changes in primary caregivers Changes in residence Other changes (e.g., new partners of the mothers, school) | Coparenting interactions Quality of maternal coparenting behavior |

Recruitment took place between 2011-2012. Probation supervisors of each community service unit in the Netherlands informed mothers with children up to 18 years of age about the research and invited them to participate. Mothers who had been incarcerated on one or more occasions during the lifetime of a child were excluded from participation for that particular child, but could still provide information for those children during whose lifetime they had never been incarcerated. After an informed consent form was signed, mothers provided background information (offense type, person information, and family characteristics). Child Behavior Check Lists (CBCLs) for each of the minor children and Coparenting Scales were administered by trained interviewers. A setting was provided where the respondents could speak freely and confidentially. This could be at home or at the office of the Probation Service. Due to practical reasons, some respondents were interviewed by phone.

1.4 Outline thesis

This dissertation contains four empirical studies examining the relationship between children's well-being and psychosocial functioning, maternal incarceration, and the functioning of the caregiving network. Table 1.1 presents an outline of the empirical chapters.

Chapter 2 describes the study group of children of incarcerated mothers. First, it reports on the caregiving arrangements of the children. Second, it focuses on internalizing and externalizing problem behavior in the children, and third, it contains an investigation of the well-being of the children in relation to their experiences of the imprisonment situation.

Chapter 3 contains a comparison between children of incarcerated mothers and children whose convicted mothers were not incarcerated on internalizing, externalizing, and social problems. The effects of age and gender on these outcomes were examined and the analyses controlled for background characteristics and offense type of the mothers.

Chapter 4 focuses on instability in the caregiving situation of children of incarcerated mothers. In order to examine whether incarceration is a marker for heightened risk exposure or causes risk in and of itself, the study in this chapter distinguishes between caregiving instability before and after the start of maternal incarceration.

Chapter 5 addresses the question whether coparenting relationships exist between incarcerated mothers and the children's caregivers. Furthermore it focuses on the quality of the mothers' coparenting behavior. The study in this chapter distinguishes

the effect of incarceration on coparenting interaction and –quality from other risk factors by comparing children of incarcerated mothers with children whose mothers are serving a community sentence. Another goal of this study was to examine whether there were differences in the existence of a coparenting relationship and the quality of the mother’s coparenting behavior for the different type of caregivers with whom children resided.

Chapter 6 presents a general discussion in which the main findings of the dissertation are summarized and discussed. The discussion elaborates on methodological limitations and strengths. Implications of this dissertation for future research as well as for policy and practice are discussed. The chapters can be read as separate studies. As a consequence, some overlap in the methodological parts of the studies was inevitable.

Chapter

2

The well-being of children of incarcerated mothers: an exploratory study for the Netherlands

This chapter was published as:

Hissel, S.C.E.M., Bijleveld, C.C.J.H., & Kruttschnitt, C. (2011). The well-being of children of incarcerated mothers: An exploratory study for the Netherlands. *European Journal of Criminology*, 8, 346-360. For the purpose of consistency in the dissertation and for the purpose of clarification, some small (textual) changes were made.

Abstract

Little empirical research exists on children whose mothers are incarcerated. We examined Dutch children's experiences regarding their mothers' incarceration, using a mixed methods approach. We found that, although children stayed in various caregiving situations, a large proportion of them were already living apart from their mothers when maternal incarceration started. The children reported elevated levels of problem behavior and decreased well-being. There is evidence that these may also be due to the negative life events they experienced before their mothers' incarceration. Recommendations for future research are discussed.

2.1 Introduction

The recent well-documented growth in imprisonment rates in several Western industrialised nations (Tonry & Bijleveld, 2007) has produced a large increase in the number of children with an incarcerated parent. Over 50% of prisoners in the US report having a child under the age of 18 (Western & Pettit, 2010). Although most incarcerated parents are fathers, the number of children in the US with an incarcerated mother more than doubled (up 131%) between 1991 and 2010 owing to the substantial growth in female imprisonment over recent decades (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). In the Netherlands, there has also been a marked increase in the number of incarcerated women: the average per day number of imprisoned women grew from 400 in 1995 to 800 in 2005, and an estimated 50% of these women have a child under 18 years of age (Slotboom, Bijleveld, Day, & Van Giezen, 2008).

There is a large body of research on women prisoners (see, for an overview, Kruttschnitt & Gartner, 2003), in which motherhood and mother-child relationships are often mentioned (e.g., Enos, 2001). As Owen (1998) indicated, incarcerated mothers speak repeatedly about the tragedy of separation from their children and are worried about the effects of the separation on their children's well-being. However, empirical knowledge about the effects of maternal imprisonment on children's well-being is limited (Hairston, 2007; Murray, Farrington, Sekol, & Olsen, 2009). The extant research is based on small samples and usually focuses on maternal attitudes towards, and perceptions of, their children. A broader body of scholarship has examined the effects of paternal incarceration on children (Murray & Farrington, 2008a, 2008b; Nurse, 2002). This research suggested that the children of imprisoned fathers are at risk of various negative outcomes in terms of problem behavior (Murray et al., 2009). Children of incarcerated parents are known to grow up in a context of frequent caregiving disruptions (Phillips, Erkanli, Keeler, & Costello, 2006). Risks may be magnified when mothers go to prison both because incarcerated mothers are often the primary, and in this sense the most important, caregivers (Bloom, 1993; Fishman, 1983; Murray & Farrington, 2008a; Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, & Kennon, 1999). Presumably, caregiving arrangements for the children change more dramatically when mothers, as opposed to fathers, are incarcerated (Myers et al., 1999). While women in prison are held further away from home than men, they are more likely to have children under the age of 16 living with them at the time of their sentencing (Codd, 2008; Prison Reform Trust, 2007).

This study details the well-being and experiences of Dutch children with an incarcerated mother. Given that few females are incarcerated in the Netherlands and given inclusion criteria, the study is small in size employing mixed methods (qualitative/quantitative). We focus on the caregiving situation of these children as

well as their feelings of well-being, problem behavior, and their contacts with the incarcerated mother².

Although, by any measure, (maternal) imprisonment in the Netherlands is relatively rare by comparison to the US or the UK, this study is an important addition to the international literature for the following reasons. First the perspective of the mothers, the caregivers, and the children are all studied. The child perspective is especially unique as studies that directly assess the children themselves are rare (Gabel & Johnston, 1995; Poehlmann, 2005b). Second, because most of the existing research on this topic stems from the US, studies from different countries are necessary to understand how parental incarceration affects the lives of children. Using the US as a paradigmatic case on which to base the effect of parental incarceration on children is problematic in a number of respects. First, in the US incarceration of a parent generally implies a substantial drop in family income; as such, it is hard to separate the effect of incarceration *per se*, from collateral consequences. Such large drops in income are less likely to occur in Western countries with extensive welfare policies. Second, the US disproportionately locks up citizens of African-American background, whose family structure and support networks have been seriously compromised by their history of diaspora. These children may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of maternal incarceration relative to children of other racial and ethnic groups residing in other countries. Third, sentence length should moderate the impact of incarceration and the US has fairly long sentences compared to many Western countries. Fourth, and finally, in many Western countries, prison sentences are handed out mainly for more serious offenses. As a result, the characteristics of the population of incarcerated mothers in these countries should differ from those of incarcerated mothers in the US.

We begin by examining the literature on parental, and where possible specifically maternal, imprisonment insofar as it pertains to three areas: caregiving arrangements for the children of incarcerated parents; risk factors, problem behavior and decreased well-being of these children; and contact with their incarcerated parent. We then describe our sample, methodology, and results.

² Unfortunately, at the time of publishing, only two studies have examined maternal incarceration in the Netherlands. Wolleswinkel (1997) examined the legal rights of incarcerated mothers and Braam, Mak, and Tan (2007) focused on incarcerated mothers' quality of contacts with their children. Based on interviews with five incarcerated mothers and relevant persons (e.g. their children, relatives, Youth Care) around these mothers, Braam and colleagues (2007) identified difficulties concerning the contact between the incarcerated mothers and their children. For example, they found mothers and children had difficulties in maintaining contact as prison visits were possible only during school hours and that travel distances often made visiting prohibitively complicated.

The following research questions were addressed: (1) How is caregiving organized when mothers are incarcerated? (2) Are there any signs of internalizing and externalizing problem behavior? (3) What is the well-being of the children and what are their perceptions, and experiences of the imprisonment situation?

2.2 Prior research on children of incarcerated parents

Caregiving arrangements

As far as we are aware, few studies have investigated the caregiving arrangements of the children of incarcerated mothers. Exact numbers are only available for the US, where it has been estimated that grandparents serve as the primary caregiver for anywhere between one-half and two-thirds of the children of incarcerated mothers (Mumola, 2000; Poehlmann, 2005b). This may be owing to the relatively high proportion of African-American prisoners, where family involvement of the grandmother in childcare is more common (Cecil, McHale, Strozier, & Pietsch, 2008). One-quarter (Poehlmann, 2005b) to one-third (Mumola, 2000) of children live with their father, and between one tenth and one-third of the children stay with other family members - depending on the type of prison (state or federal). Other children live with relatives (10%), in foster care or in similar formal institutions (7%, Mumola, 2000). Approximately two-thirds of the imprisoned mothers lived with their children before their incarceration; one-third of these mothers did not have a caregiving role in their children's lives at the time their incarceration began (Mumola, 2000).

In the UK, just 5% of children of incarcerated mothers remain in their home once their mother has been sentenced (Action for Prisoners' Families, n.d.) and only 9% of the children are cared for by their father while mother is in prison (Corston, 2007). In the Netherlands, no comparable data are available on the children of incarcerated parents.

Risk factors, and subsequent problems and decreased well-being

Children of incarcerated parents may be exposed to a number of risk factors prior to their parents' incarceration (Murray & Farrington, 2005). These risk factors include parental substance abuse and mental illness, child abuse and neglect, poverty and residential instability (Phillips, Burns, Wagner, Kramer, & Robbins, 2002). When a mother is incarcerated, the secure attachment relationship between the child and the parent is at risk (Poehlmann, 2005b). Additional risk factors may be incurred from

the trauma of witnessing the arrest, or the realization that the parent is criminally involved (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Murray & Farrington, 2008a). Missing the parent and sadness play a part too (Braam, Mak, & Tan, 2007) as do stigma and social exclusion (Codd, 1998; Myers et al., 1999). Children may experience feelings of shame and guilt (Van Nijnatten, 1998).

The risks to which children of incarcerated parents are exposed both before and during incarceration can lead to problem behavior and decreased well-being. 'Well-being' is a broad term encompassing how the child experiences his/her life in various social domains. Decreased well-being can be expressed in externalizing problems, including antisocial behavior, delinquency, drug use and school drop-out (Murray & Farrington, 2008a). Internalizing problems, such as depressive complaints, anxiety and emotional problems also arise. Several studies also found post-traumatic stress, substance abuse, sleep problems, and reduced concentration in children of incarcerated parents (Johnston, 1995; Murray, 2005; Murray & Farrington, 2008b; Poehlmann, 2005b). However, it remains unclear whether decreased well-being or other negative outcomes are attributable to the incarceration of the mother or to pre-existing risk factors.

Relationship between well-being of the children and contacts with their mothers

Children's lack of contact, or the limited availability for maintaining contact with their incarcerated mothers can contribute to their decreased well-being. Bloom and Steinhart (1993) recommended programs, policies, and procedures that encourage mother-child contact and family reunification, both during and after the mothers' incarceration. Murray and Farrington (2008a) indicated that it is difficult for incarcerated mothers to maintain contact with their children, as there are generally few women's prisons and hence travel distances are large. Codd (2008) pointed out that imprisoned fathers are more frequently visited by their children than imprisoned mothers and that the nature and quality of the mother-child relationship is heavily dependent on the quality of the relationship between the mother and the current caregiver (Codd, 2008). Although visits are usually experienced as pleasant by children (Braam et al., 2007), some scholars reported that more contact between the mother and the child during the period of maternal incarceration increases children's anxiety (Poehlmann, 2005b). However, Giordano's (2010) longitudinal study of the family lives of 125 institutionalized delinquents revealed that children of incarcerated parents were not always traumatized by the separation caused by their parents' incarceration. Some of the children in her sample mentioned that the period during which their mother was incarcerated was in fact one of relative stability.

2.3 Method

Participants

The Netherlands has four penitentiary centres where female prisoners are held. This research included participants from the regular units of these prisons. We excluded wards within these prisons where women with severe psychological or psychiatric disturbances were incarcerated, as well as wards with minimum security as these female prisoners may not be continuously separated from their children. Remand prisoners were not approached because they could be released anytime.

Through the penitentiary staff we invited all incarcerated women with children to attend an introductory meeting where we explained our research. After informed consent had been given, semi-structured interviews were conducted and questionnaires were administered. If mothers gave permission, the caregivers of the children were approached for semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. If, following the above, both caregivers and the children themselves agreed, the children were also interviewed and, when possible, they filled in questionnaires as well. The conditions for participation were that mothers had children up to 18 years of age residing in the Netherlands who were aware that their mother was incarcerated.

A total of 56 women were informed about our study and asked to participate. Of these, 37 agreed. Reasons for non-participation varied: some children were older than 18, some did not know that their mother was incarcerated, or the mother gave no reason. The 37 mothers who did agree to participate had a total of 93 children up to 18 years of age. Of these children, 68 children constituted the child sample for this research. Of the 25 children who were excluded, 21 were living abroad, three had terminated contact with their mother long ago and one was excluded because the child's mother did not want the child to participate in the research for unstated reasons. The 68 children have 30 different mothers. It is not possible to indicate precisely what percentage of mothers, meeting the inclusion criteria, finally responded. Using data from the Central Prison Department's electronic prison occupancy system (TULP) for the months in which we held the introductory meetings in each of the four prisons, and assuming on the basis of previous research (Slotboom et al., 2008) that 50% of female prisoners have children under the age of 18, we estimate that the 30 mothers from whom we have any information about their children, represent 37% of the total available population of mothers. This 37% is probably an underestimate as the 50% of prisoners who are mothers, as reported by Slotboom and her colleagues (2008), included mothers with children outside the Netherlands.

Equal proportions of these 30 women were incarcerated for violent offenses ($N = 11$) and drug offenses ($N = 11$). The remaining mothers were incarcerated for property offenses ($N = 3$) and sexual exploitation ($N = 1$); four women would not reveal the offense for which they had been incarcerated.

During the interview phase of our research a further 37 of the 68 children had to be dropped from the sample. For some, the mothers did not give permission to approach their children because they judged them too vulnerable to participate ($N = 10$), for others it turned out that these children did not know that their mother was incarcerated ($N = 3$), Youth Care or caregivers did not give permission ($N = 18$) or, despite repeated efforts, the caregiver was impossible to contact or the child did not show up for the appointment ($N = 6$). A total of 31 children eventually participated in the research themselves (15 girls and 16 boys). We interviewed 22 and observed nine. The nine observations were done in place of interviews, because six children were too young to be interviewed, two children were deemed to be too vulnerable to speak about what had happened and one child was impossible to interview owing to conduct problems. Despite the fact that mothers and caregivers for some children did not give consent to participate in the research, they would sometimes give an interview or fill out questionnaires about the children themselves. We have, therefore, more information and questionnaires about the children from the mothers and caregivers than from the children themselves. The breakdown of the different types and sources of information we obtained on these children is shown in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1. *Child Sample*

| Sample | <i>N</i> children |
|---|-------------------|
| <i>Interviews</i> | |
| Interviews given by mothers about their children | 68 |
| Interviews given by caregivers about the children | 35 |
| Children participated themselves | 31 |
| of which interviewed | 22 |
| of which observed | 9 |
| <i>Questionnaires</i> | |
| Questionnaires filled in by mothers about their children | 47 |
| Questionnaires filled in by caregivers about the children | 22 |

A non-response analysis was conducted to compare the non-responding and responding children. The scores on the outcome variables were comparable; given sample size, testing was not deemed informative. A comparison between the

qualitative information of these two groups on life experiences, decreased well-being and contact between the mothers and the children, based on the interviews given by the mothers, revealed no remarkable differences. The average age of the children was nine years; the youngest was six months and the oldest 18 years at the time of the research.

Procedure

We always provided a setting where the respondents could speak confidentially. In most cases, completing the interviews and questionnaires took about one and a half hour for mothers, caregivers, and children. Two researchers were present at every interview setting. We interviewed a child only on the condition that the mother, the caregiver and, if the child was 12 years or older, the child signed an informed consent form. The consent also included the statement that the researchers would break confidentiality if it was indicated that the child or others were in danger. In that case the researchers would inform a counsellor and the mother or caregiver would be notified of this³.

Measures

To assess problem behavior, mothers and caregivers completed the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). The CBCL is a widely used instrument to obtain standardized parent reports of children's problem behavior. It has acceptable criterion validity and good construct validity. Scores can be compared with those of a norm group of the same gender and age. The valid norm is that 7% of the population will have a problematic (borderline or clinical) score on the internalizing, the externalizing, and the total problem behavior scale. If the percentage of problematic scores in our group of children is above 7%, this means that our group of children differs unfavourably from the norm.

The well-being of the children in relation to the incarceration of their mother was examined with semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions with room for additional and impromptu questions. Topics that were discussed included the child's functioning in his/her social environment and at school, the quality and the frequency of contacts between the mother and the child, general feelings about the situation created by incarceration, possible problems in the current caregiving situation and the home environment. Finally, the child's perception of the future was discussed.

³ The data collection procedure was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Law at the VU University.

Analysis

Questionnaire data were rated according to the scoring protocol (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). Because of the small number of respondents, we did not perform tests of statistical significance but reported absolute numbers.

The tape-recorded interviews with the children were all transcribed verbatim. Content analyses enabled to uncover issues central to the well-being of children of incarcerated mothers. The transcripts were coded with regard to the discussed domains: feelings reported by the children, school and friends, home environment, and contact with the incarcerated mothers. Through a process of repeated readings, answers were clustered on the various domains. Recordings of interviews with mothers and caregivers were compared to the responses of the children. The issues captured by this process will be illustrated with short vignettes, that have been deliberately altered with regard to nonessential details so that the children remain unrecognizable. All names used are fictional.

2.4 Results

Caregiving situation

The largest group of children, about one-third ($N = 25$) resided at an official foster home. Roughly one-fifth ($N = 14$) lived with their father. In some cases the father had moved back in with his mother (the grandmother) or with other family members. Nine children (13%) lived with their grandparents. A further one-fifth (14 children) stayed with other family members or the informal network of friends and relatives. Six children (9%) resided in an institution under a civil or criminal law measure. A total of 27 children (40%) were already living apart from their mother prior to her incarceration. In almost all cases, the child placement in foster care was a civil law measure as a consequence of an intervention by Youth Care, though two mothers had placed their children with their family themselves well before incarceration. Thus, for two-fifths of the children, incarceration of the mother did not break up the family; rather, this had already occurred. For three-fifths of the children, the incarceration did lead to a change in the caregiving situation. This does not mean that the majority of the children (60%) who were cared for by their mothers before incarceration had stable living environments prior to their mothers' arrests. It became clear that some children moved house frequently before the incarceration of their mother, although not all children were able to articulate this. Disruptions in living arrangements often occurred because parents took in a new partner, which often led to new siblings (step-siblings or half-siblings) moving in.

Internalizing and externalizing problem behavior

We have CBCL measurements from the mothers or the caregivers (46 from mothers, 22 from caregivers), providing partially overlapping data on a total of 50 children about problem behavior in the previous six months. Both mothers and caregivers reported much problem behavior in the children. A borderline or clinical score on the total scale of problem behavior was reported for 32% of the children by the mothers and for 55% of the children by the caregivers. The caregivers thus clearly reported considerably more problem behavior than the mothers. Both mothers and caregivers reported much internalizing problem behavior, 47% and 50% respectively, with affective problem behavior being mentioned most often. Mothers reported externalizing problem behavior less frequently than the caregivers, 26% against 36% respectively. Because mothers see their children less often than the caregivers do, it is not surprising that they are less able to perceive problem behavior, and especially externalizing behavior. Given that the population norm for a borderline or clinical score is seven percent, we conclude that problem behavior is strongly elevated among children of incarcerated mothers. We do not have measurements on problem behavior before the mothers' incarceration; therefore, we cannot say if these problems pre-date their incarceration.

Interestingly, caregivers reported higher scores on problem behavior for the children who had been separated from their mother prior to incarceration than for the children who resided with their mother until she was incarcerated (internalizing 60% versus 42%, and externalizing 40% versus 25%). Thus, children whose mothers stopped caring for them prior to incarceration had more problem behaviors than the children who were first separated from their mothers at the time of incarceration.

Well-being

Sadness and anger

Almost all children indicated that their mother's incarceration caused them sadness. Sadness may be expressed through nightmares, worries about their mother, feelings of loneliness or gloomy thoughts. Most of them wanted their mothers to be released from prison. As one five year old said: "I have two big wishes: that mummy isn't in prison and that I get the LEGO toy castle." Some children told us they did not want to burden their mothers with their own sadness, and that they tried hard to keep up a happy facade.

"My mum sometimes calls me. She says she'll be released soon and that she feels fine. Well, uhm... I also said that I was OK, just to not hurt her or something. But

when I was talking with my aunt, I was honest with her. I told her, just calmly, the whole story and that I wanted to go to a psychiatrist because I had completely collapsed the other day ... Well, I told my aunt all this and then she told my mum that I'm visiting a psychiatrist. My mum was sad, you know.... And since then, every time that we speak she's sad about how I'm doing. Well, I wasn't quite happy with that. I wanted to spare her my trouble."

Other children indicated that they tried to find positive pastimes when they miss their mothers, like playing football or dancing.

Besides sadness, there were also feelings of anger. Children told us that they thought their mother was "stupid" or had "been foolish", or they reproached her ("how could she have done this"). One or two said that it was a good thing that their mother was incarcerated ("so she can do some thinking"). Others indicated that their mother's incarceration gave them a "time-out". Some of these older children told us that they thought that they had been damaged by their mother's mistakes. They indicated that they had to work hard to stay in control of their lives, and that they felt like "premature grown-ups" with money and housing responsibilities, on top of their schooling responsibilities. These older children appeared quite self-reliant and resilient and they sometimes viewed the (temporary) separation from their mother as a chance to get a grip on a previously more complex situation.

"I live just the way it is. What has been, that has been ... At least I don't want to live my life the way my mum did. She is always looking for the wrong men and she lets herself be abused. I'm not having any! I also don't want a child on my 21st. I don't think I'll have the financial resources to raise a child by then. The child has no life. My mum lacked the financial resources to raise me. Look where I've landed. I'll only have children when I'm sure that I have the financial means and that I can offer the child a life with both a mother and a father. You can never know for sure, but my mother gave birth to me in a situation of...you know... a relationship of nothing."

With this girl we noticed, like other older children, a reversal of role between her and her mother:

"I told her [her mother]: if I notice that you're using again or something, then that's it. You know, I gave her a second chance and there's no such thing as a third chance. It's hard to say something like that, because well... it's your mother. But well, he that will not be taught must suffer. She has only herself to blame."

Of the total population of 68 children, almost a third ($N = 22$) had witnessed the offense or the arrest. One of them was a co-offender and one was a victim. Seven reported having witnessed their mother's offense and four also saw her being arrested.

School and friends

All children attended school regularly, with only one reporting a short break in attendance because of moving in with the foster family. A number of children performed poorly at school. They told us that they had too much on their minds to concentrate. Usually a key figure, such as a tutor, was aware of the incarceration of their mother. Only very rarely was no one at school aware of the child's situation. Older children particularly preferred that no one knew about their mothers' imprisonment.

Almost all children had a social network of friends; only one or two lived relatively secluded lives. The children reported that they had told only a select number of friends about their mother's imprisonment and that their friends generally reacted with sympathy. Only two children mentioned that they had been bullied but this was not directly related to the incarceration of their mother. The older children were generally more afraid of being stigmatized by their peers than the younger children. And, as the following child reported, this often resulted in the children lying about their mother's whereabouts.

CHILD: "Children at school ask 'where is your mother?' Sometimes I say I don't know and sometimes I don't answer." Q: "How do you feel about them asking that?" CHILD: "I don't like it. Sometimes I'm a bit ashamed... Then they ask: 'is this your mother [referring to his grandmother]?' Sometimes I say yes."

Home environment

As previously noted, many children experienced several moves during their mother's incarceration and such changes in caregiving arrangements were often accompanied by a change in parenting style. Some children indicated that they were unhappy. They felt like a visitor in the (foster) family. One boy spoke of having "to walk on eggs" so as not to get reprimanded:

"I just feel like there are double standards. They have their own child and really, in everything the child has its way. And it's not that I should have my way all the time, but I think that we should be treated equally. Uhm... well, we all have our own household chores and I don't mind doing it, but sometimes I have the feeling that they constantly keep reminding me about it... I have the feeling that I am growing up in someone else's house and that is such a miserable feeling. Only my sleeping room

feels like my own place... And when I come downstairs in the living room and I don't see even a single picture of myself in the whole house.... you know what it is...I feel really like I'm in someone else's home."

Some of them had difficulties with the new (stricter) rules.

"I was seven years old when I came here. I thought it was a disaster, all those rules. At home, I didn't have any rules and I didn't have to go to school if I didn't want to."

Others complained that they needed their mothers' discipline. And still others (albeit a minority) explicitly stated that the current situation was better than before. The incarceration was for quite a few preceded by familial quarrels, violence, abuse, neglect, frequent changes of residence, divorce or drug abuse of the parents. One girl told us about the home situation before her mother's incarceration:

"The atmosphere at home was always very negative. Yes, sometimes it was cosy, but then it could...Then only a glass had to fall, so to speak, and at once the whole atmosphere completely reversed. Then tables were thrown across the room."

This girl stated that the relationship between her and her mother, now that she was in jail, had improved and that her mother acknowledged that the former situation, in which she let herself be abused by men, also had a bad effect on her daughter.

Contact

One of the most frequently mentioned problems was maintaining contact during the incarceration of the mother. According to the mothers, 42 of the 68 children (62%) had visited their mother in prison on one or more occasions. The frequency of visits differed greatly from once every few months to almost every week⁴. Roughly one-third of the children (32%) had not (yet) visited their mother during her incarceration. Sometimes this occurred because contact with the mother was completely broken, for example, as a result of the child having been victimized by the mother or because they were already living in a foster family long before the mothers' incarceration. For others, visits were impossible because of logistical problems: for instance, the prison was situated too far away or transportation was unavailable. In addition, the prison rules and regime created some difficulties in the children's ability to maintain contact with their mothers. Telephone contact could be difficult when women were locked in their cells at times when the children returned home from school. One boy told

⁴ For six percent of the children it was unknown if they had visited their mother yet.

us that he had not visited his mother yet because the regular visiting hours were during school hours and, although mother-child visiting days were arranged at the weekends, these were limited to a certain age.

Young children in particular appeared to be deeply affected, or even intimidated, by the prison and the prison regime, as evidenced by frequent and detailed stories about visiting procedures.

“I didn’t see mummy immediately. We had to go through a door, then we had to wait till that door was closed before the next door could open. We had to sign in and then we had to put everything in a safe except for small change [...] Then we had to push a button and wait until the door was opened again. We went upstairs where we had to wait till the door was completely locked. Only then did we come in the room where mummy was [...] Mummy had to sit at the table precisely on the spot where something was around her leg so that she couldn’t pass stuff to us, or something [...] Then we had to go all the way through the steel doors again. It’s weird that your mum is in prison with all those steel doors [...] Then you get the feeling that your mother is a criminal [...] but actually she isn’t. Q: “How does it feel? I don’t know, I can’t really explain”[...]

We were told by mothers that their children had difficulty understanding the rules for giving presents (a drawing for instance) and rules for physical contact during regular visiting hours. However, the mother-child visiting days represented an important and welcome contrast to the strict rules surrounding gifts and physical contact during visits. Even though the children did not have a clear vision of a future together with their mother, most children did want to live with her again as soon as she would be released, especially the younger ones.

2.5 Discussion

This descriptive and exploratory study uncovered several findings that warrant further attention. First, we found that there is a wide range of caregiving arrangements for children of incarcerated mothers. Quite a few children were exposed to multiple changes in caregiving arrangements, that may negatively affect the well-being of the children (Johnston, 1995). Second, we found that strongly elevated levels of problem behaviors were reported on the CBCL. However, it is not clear from this study whether this is the consequence of the incarceration of their mother and the related caregiving disruptions. More than 50% of the children had a problematic score on the CBCL. Third, although both the mothers and the caregivers reported

internalizing problem behavior for about 50% of the children, mothers reported less externalizing problem behavior. It is not surprising since the mothers may not observe all behavior, or want to acknowledge it, while they are imprisoned. Some children indicated that they hide their problems from their mother in order not to burden her. This suggests that incarcerated mothers may be poor informants about the well-being of their children. Yet the children, especially those who were old enough to express their feelings verbally, were often surprisingly articulate about what they had experienced and how their mothers' incarceration had affected their lives. Fourth, although this group of children had complex and widely varying problems, all of them reported sadness because of their mothers' imprisonment. The children's age seems to make a difference in how they experienced this sadness. Fifth, although it is generally presumed that contact between the children and their incarcerated mothers should be encouraged, our study showed that actually this may not be beneficial for some of the children. For all children who did want to see their mother, maintaining contact appeared difficult. Visits were often emotionally charged. For younger children especially, visiting the prison setting could be quite intimidating. Many children and mothers found calling over the phone not easy and opportunities for calling were limited. The distance to the prison, even in a small country like the Netherlands, was also often a stumbling block.

Our research also calls into question some previous findings. Most existing research concludes (albeit sometimes implicitly) that the mothers' incarceration results in the break-up of the family (Bloom, 1995; Poehlmann, 2005b). This break-up may lead to decreased well-being of children because of unstable caregiving arrangements or because of an insecure attachment relationship with the mother stemming from the separation between mother and child (Poehlmann, 2005b). However, we found, consistent with the findings of Glaze and Maruschak (2008), that incarceration of the mother did not always imply a change in the caregiving situation: a substantial number of children were already living apart from their mother, and thus were already cared for by other caregivers prior to the mother's incarceration.

Although this study provides some critical information about the lives of children who have incarcerated mothers, it has limitations. We almost certainly missed children in our sample who were worse off than average. Some caregivers felt that the child was too vulnerable to be visited by a researcher. It is also very likely that we missed the children whose mothers failed to provide them with proper care prior to their imprisonment. Some mothers to whom we spoke had little confidence in institutions such as Youth Care and the Child Welfare Council. Possibly, mothers with children in such irregular situations chose not to participate in the study and "let sleeping dogs lie." Additionally, some mothers might have chosen not to inform the penitentiary centre that they had children. In that case they were not even invited

for the introduction meeting. We could not speak with mothers who were placed in special care units. If we assume that their children were worse off than the children we studied, our data may underestimate the extent of problem behavior among the children of incarcerated mothers. Although this is entirely possible, it is also possible that our sample was relatively well balanced since it also excluded the children whose mothers were, relatively speaking, somewhat better off – the women who had short sentences and the women who resided in open regimes or were on remand for a short period.

Our research raises the question of whether the children's problems are due to their mothers' imprisonment. We saw that a large part of the children had experienced multiple life events before the incarceration of the mother. We also found that the children who were already living separately from their mothers prior to incarceration had higher scores on both internalizing and externalizing problem behavior than the other children. It seems plausible, then, that the increased levels of problem behaviors are at least partly due to other risk factors than the incarceration of their mother. Nevertheless, these problem behaviors most likely are compounded for some children (especially if they are young) by the sadness and transitions they experience when their mother is removed from their home. In sum, we argue that the incarceration is probably not the sole cause of the serious problems these children face, but that it may in fact be a corollary of existing problems in their mother's life.

Finally, this study raises the policy question of whether it is possible to create special facilities for incarcerated mothers with children up to 18 years of age to minimize the collateral consequences of imprisonment for these children. Without answering this question, we note that, in addition to the work of volunteer organizations and activities undertaken by the penitentiary centres, some mothers, caregivers and children have found surprisingly inventive solutions to handle the constraints of incarceration. For example, one mother and her daughter used an external answering machine on which the girl could leave messages at any time of the day, even when the mother was locked in and unavailable. Such simple solutions might alleviate part of the distress some of these children face. Of greater import, however, is the question of whether the government can play a part in improving the situation of children of incarcerated mothers when the mother is taken into custody or perhaps before that time. Certainly, the answer to this question will depend on the findings of subsequent research that teases out the unique contributions of children's experiences to their well-being before and during their mothers' incarceration.

Chapter

3

Effects of maternal incarceration on children's behavior

This chapter was submitted as:

Hissel, S.C.E.M., Siegel, J.A., Bijleveld, C.C.J.H., Van der Laan, P.H., Oosterman, M., & Schuengel, C. Effects of maternal incarceration on children's behavior. The chapter is under review.

Abstract

This study examined differences in problem behaviors between two groups of children of criminally active mothers who served either a prison sentence or community service. The effects of age and gender on these outcomes were investigated. This study found that children of incarcerated mothers had significantly more social problems than children whose mothers were criminal but had not been incarcerated. Being a child of a criminally involved but not incarcerated mother was associated with externalizing problem behavior in preschool children. Incarceration adds to the already high burden for children of criminally active mothers.

3.1 Introduction

Worldwide, the female prison population has increased considerably over the last few decades (Walmsley, 2012) and in some countries female incarceration rates have grown more steeply than males' (Frost, Greene, & Pranis, 2006; Gelb, 2003; Kruttschnitt, 2010). As a result, the number of children whose mothers are incarcerated has been growing as well (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Wildeman, 2009). Children of incarcerated parents may experience deleterious effects due to traumatic separation from the parent, stigma and socioeconomic disadvantages (Arditti, 2012; Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Murray & Farrington, 2008a). However, these children are often exposed to numerous other risk factors as well, including their parents' criminal behavior, making it difficult to isolate the unique contribution of incarceration to any negative outcomes. Thus, it is important to disentangle the possible impact of parental incarceration from parental criminality (Besemer, Van der Geest, Murray, Bijleveld, & Farrington, 2011). One approach to control for other risk factors than incarceration is to compare children of incarcerated mothers to children of mothers with criminal histories who are not incarcerated. The current study assessed emotional and behavior problems of children of incarcerated mothers and a comparison group of children of convicted mothers who were serving their sentences in the community.

Although there are far more children with incarcerated fathers than incarcerated mothers, maternal incarceration is of particular concern because on average, the emotional and psychosocial involvement of mothers with their children is greater than of fathers (Murray & Farrington, 2008a). Imprisoned mothers are more likely than fathers to have been living with and to have been the sole caregiver to their children before their incarceration (Cunningham & Baker, 2003; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Loper, Carlson, Levitt, & Scheffel, 2009), which means their children face a greater likelihood of separation from a primary caregiver. This also means that children are likely to experience additional changes in their living situation, including new caregivers and changes in residence and schools, if the mother is imprisoned (Bocknek, Sanderson, & Britner, 2009; Geller, Garfinkel, Cooper, & Mincy, 2009). Furthermore, a mother's incarceration is more likely than a father's to deprive children of the opportunity to live with their other biological parent because fewer than four in ten children whose mothers are imprisoned in the United States are cared for by their fathers during the mother's incarceration (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), whereas the great majority of children of incarcerated fathers are in the care of their mother during the father's imprisonment (Loper et al., 2009).

Despite the apparent risks of maternal incarceration, evidence of its impact on children has been inconsistent, leading to a lack of consensus about its harmfulness

(Johnson & Easterling, 2013; Wildeman, Wakefield, & Turney, 2013). Nearly all early studies on the effects of a mother's imprisonment on her children, most often based on qualitative interviews with adults (e.g., mothers or caregivers of the children), reported that at least some children were adversely affected (e.g., decreased well-being) by their mother's incarceration (Baunach, 1985; Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Fritsch & Burkhead, 1981; Henriques, 1982; Hunter, 1984; Stanton, 1980). More recent research utilizing varying methodological approaches has yielded less consistent results. A possible explanation is that these studies examined different outcomes in children. However, even among the few studies that focused on children's problem behavior, evidence for increased emotional and behavioral problems was not convincing. Hagen, Myers, and Mackintosh (2005) and Hissel, Bijleveld, and Kruttschnitt (2011) concluded that the risk of developing clinically significant internalizing and externalizing problems was greater for children whose mothers were incarcerated than children in the general population. Menting, Orobio de Castro, and Matthyis (2012) found that children of incarcerated mothers being released from prison scored higher on some (overall difficulties and hyperactivity) but not all types of problem behavior (emotional symptoms and conduct problems) than children whose mothers were not incarcerated. Geller, Garfinkel, Cooper, and Mincy (2009) found scant evidence that maternal incarceration had adverse consequences for children's internalizing or externalizing problem behavior, although trends were in the expected direction. The comparison groups of Geller and her colleagues (2009) and Menting and her colleagues (2012) might be drawn from a sample experiencing more problems in their living environment than the norm scores of the behavioral questionnaire Hagen and her colleagues (2005) and Hissel and her colleagues (2011) used. For instance, in the study of Geller and colleagues (2009) non-marital parents were oversampled and Menting and colleagues (2012) used a comparison of children from disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Several studies have focused on other types of outcomes, like school problems or delinquency, but these also did not provide a consistent picture of how children fared. Some research has found that youth who experienced maternal incarceration were more likely to have criminal records (Crowe, 1972; Huebner & Gustafson, 2007) or to engage in delinquent behavior, a deviant lifestyle, or substance abuse (Dannerbeck, 2005; Hanlon et al., 2005a; Midgley & Lo, 2013; Trice & Brewster, 2004) than other youth, although a study of children in foster care in one Pennsylvania county found that those whose mothers were incarcerated did not differ with respect to arrest and were even less likely than other foster children to be involved in the juvenile justice system (Allegheny County of Department of Human Services, 2008). Poehlmann (2005a) found an elevated rate of subaverage cognitive functioning whereas Cho (2009) concluded that children of incarcerated mothers fared better than other children on educational outcomes (e.g., grade retention).

Findings on effects of maternal incarceration are not only difficult to interpret due to the equivocal findings, but also due to the variance in comparison groups, including children drawn from non-deviant populations (e.g., Johnson, 2009, but see Murray, Farrington, Sekol, & Olsen, 2009). However, children of incarcerated mothers - and of mothers under the attention of the criminal justice system - experience deviant and troubled environments more often than other children, even disregarding the incarceration. Apart from their criminal involvement, incarcerated mothers, when compared to women in the general population, have higher rates of substance abuse (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003; Carlson, Shafer, & Duffee, 2010; Fazel, Bains, & Doll, 2006; Greene, Haney, & Hurtado, 2000; Morgan, 2013), mental illness (James & Glaze, 2006; Poehlmann, 2005b; Sheridan, 1996) and violent victimization (Browne, Miller, & Maguin, 1999; DeHart, 2008; Harlow, 1999; Islam-Zwart & Vik, 2004; Richie, 1996) and have generally lower incomes and lower levels of education and employment (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Ferraro & Moe, 2003; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Greenfeld & Snell, 1999), making them significantly different even from other low-income urban families (Geller, et al., 2009). The environments in which children of incarcerated mothers reside, therefore, are likely to present multiple risk factors that could be inimical to children's wellbeing (Phillips, Burns, Wagner, Kramer, & Robbins, 2002; Poehlmann, 2005a; Siegel, 2011). In order to better focus on effects that may be specific to the incarceration of mothers, an appropriate comparison group is needed (Murray et al., 2009), such as children of criminally active women who are not in prison (e.g., probationers). With the exception of Stanton (1980), however, whose study was based on a small sample of women in jail and a group of probationers⁵, no studies have employed this type of comparison group for studying emotional and behavior problems in children of incarcerated mothers.

Literature on the background characteristics of the Dutch population serving a community sentence is scarce and as far as we know, specific information on mothers in this population does not exist. However, for the entire population of adult men and women with a community service sentence, it is known that they suffer severe problems as well. For example, two fifths of them did not get any degree, more than a third had considerable financial debts (> 5000 euros), 7% were addicted to hard drugs and almost a third had mental health problems, including mental disorders and social emotional problems (Lünnemann, Beijers, & Wentink, 2005). Based on this information, we cautiously conclude that children of mothers with a community service sentence might experience a troubled living environment as well, which makes it possible to explore the additional burden that maternal incarceration places on the children.

⁵ Four of the 21 women on probation in Stanton's study had histories of prior incarceration.

Although research on children of incarcerated mothers has been growing, relatively little is known about other factors important to children's outcomes in this situation. Maternal incarceration does not occur in a vacuum. How children respond to this experience will be influenced by various child characteristics such as age and sex (Hagen et al., 2005; Hanlon et al., 2005a).

For instance, maternal incarceration is likely to affect young children under the age of 5 differently than children of other ages because of the significance of disruptions in attachment relationships in a child's earliest years (Dallaire, 2007; Poehlmann, 2005c). Some have theorized that children aged 2-6 may face graver risks than children of other ages not only because of incarceration but also because of the impact of parental criminal activity and the trauma of parental arrest (Johnston, 1995). Older children, who face different developmental tasks, such as increasing socialization skills and the development of autonomy, may react to parental incarceration with more negative external behaviors, like aggression or delinquency (Dallaire, 2007; Johnston, 1995). Older children may have lived through more than one period of incarceration and been more cognizant of its effects (Cunningham & Baker, 2003; Eddy & Reid, 2003; Johnston, 1995; Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, & Kennon, 1999). They also may have experienced other disruptions due to their mother's behavior when not in prison (Siegel, 2011), which possibly leads more often to negative feelings such as anger and resentment. School-age children might be more likely than pre-schoolers to have to deal with the effects of stigma as mother's absence at school-related events reveals their difference from other youth. Peers at school may become aware of the mother's imprisonment, a factor that takes on increasing significance as the influence of peers intensifies during adolescence (Berndt, 1979). These considerations about how incarceration affects children at different developmental stages (Dallaire, 2007; Eddy & Reid, 2003; Johnston, 1995), coupled with some evidence of differences between older and younger children indicate that it is important to explore further the age at which children experience maternal incarceration when considering child outcomes. Furthermore, while examining age may reveal whether effects vary for different ages, doing so may nevertheless fail to reveal differences in outcomes among pre-school age and school-age children, which suggests there is reason to examine these age groups separately.

It is generally assumed that there are gender-based differences in coping with stress and emotional issues such as those that parental incarceration might cause. Girls more often show internalizing problem behavior whereas boys show externalizing problems (Bakker, Ormel, Verhulst, & Oldehinkel, 2010), and some research has indeed found evidence that girls and boys are affected differently by maternal incarceration. Hanlon and his colleagues (2005a) found that daughters of incarcerated substance abusing mothers had significantly lower risk of delinquent

activity and school problems than did sons. In her study comparing children of jailed mothers with probationers' offspring, Stanton (1980) concluded that maternal incarceration affected older girls more negatively with regard to self-esteem and antisocial behaviors than males and younger girls because they were required to take on domestic responsibilities that the other children did not have to shoulder. Cho's (2010) analysis of the relationship between maternal incarceration and the risk of school dropout found that sons were more sensitive to the age at which their mothers were incarcerated. Boys who experienced maternal incarceration during early adolescence were more likely to drop out of school than those who experienced it during middle childhood or late adolescence. The risk of dropout for girls, on the other hand, was unaffected by the timing of maternal incarceration. However, the likelihood that girls would drop out because they themselves were incarcerated was affected by the length of their mother's incarceration, whereas boys' incarceration-related dropout was not. This prior research suggests that the effect of maternal incarceration may vary by sex and that the role of children's sex should be further investigated.

The current study compared behavioral outcomes in children of prisoners from all the women's prisons in the Netherlands with a comparison group of children of mothers serving a community sentence. Analyses examined the effect of age and sex of the children on these outcomes. The children ranged in age from 1 to 19, enabling this study to examine the effects of maternal incarceration on a broad range of children at differing stages of development. This chapter addressed the following research questions: (1) Did children of incarcerated mothers show heightened levels of internalizing, externalizing and social problems compared to children whose mothers are convicted but not in prison (i.e. serving a community service)? (2) Were there differences in the effect of maternal incarceration by children's age and sex?

3.2 Method

Sample

The sample of children of incarcerated mothers is part of the larger "Children of Incarcerated Mothers in the Netherlands Study (CIM-NL Study)" in which 124 incarcerated mothers provided information about the well-being of a total of 255 children and completed questionnaires about parenting and their children's problem behavior. Eighty-nine of the 124 mothers (79%) completed Child Behavior Check Lists (CBCLs) for 167 of their children. Reasons for not completing the CBCL varied.

For example, for some mothers the children were too young (CBCL is only suitable for children at least one and a half years old), some mothers did not understand or could not read the questions asked in the CBCL (due to illiteracy, cognitive ability or because they did not speak Dutch or English well enough), and some mothers did not keep any appointments scheduled for completing the CBCL and were released or transferred to another prison before they could complete the measure.

The comparison group consisted of 55 children whose mothers ($N = 28$) had been convicted and were serving a community service sentence. CBCLs were completed for all 55 children in the comparison group.

Procedure

Study group

Study recruitment took place between 2008 and 2012. The sample included children of incarcerated mothers from regular units and units with minimum security from all women's prisons in the Netherlands (between 2008 and 2009 the Netherlands had four women's prisons and between 2010-2012 there were five women's prisons). Psychiatric wards were excluded because of the vulnerability of women residing there. Through the prison staff, imprisoned mothers with children up to 18 years of age⁶ were invited to attend an introductory meeting where researchers invited them to participate in the study. Mothers who agreed to participate were asked to sign informed consent after which they were interviewed and asked to complete the Child Behavior Check List (CBCL) for each of their minor children.

Comparison group

Recruitment of a comparison group of children of mothers who had been convicted and were serving a community sentence took place between 2011-2012. The sample included children of mothers recruited from all five probation regions in the Netherlands. Probation Supervisors of the community service unit informed mothers with children up to 18 years of age about the research and mothers were invited to participate. Children of mothers who had ever been incarcerated since their birth were excluded in order not to confound children's outcomes with the possible effects of previous incarceration. After informed consent was signed, these mothers completed the CBCL for each of their minor children and provided some background information (offense type and some person information and family characteristics).

⁶ During one of the interviews, we learned that one child did not meet the age criteria of 0-18 years and was in fact 19 years old. Given that the difference from the age criterion was only a year, the child was included in the analyses.

Respondents from the study group and comparison group were compensated with a payment of 10 euros. For some mothers in the comparison group it was not possible to complete the questionnaires during one meeting with the interviewer. These mothers gave permission for an additional telephone interview to complete the questionnaires and were compensated with an additional 10 euros. Permission for the study was obtained from the Netherlands Department of Correctional Services (DJI) and the Probation Service of the Netherlands. The data-collection protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Law at VU University.

Measures

Emotional and behavioral problems

The Child Behavior Check List (CBCL) (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001) is designed to identify behavioral and emotional problems in children. It is an age-adjusted instrument widely used to obtain standardized parent reports of children's problem behavior. The checklist has two age-appropriate versions. The preschool version is for one and a half to five years old children and consists of 99 items, while the school-age checklist for six to 18 years olds has 122 items about the child's behavior. Responses are scored on a three-point Likert scale (0 = not true, 1 = somewhat or sometimes true, 2 = very true or often true) and are summed to produce scores for seven syndrome scales for the pre-school version and eight for the school-age versions (e.g., Anxious/Depressed, Attention Problems, Aggressive Behavior). Three syndrome scales on the older children's version (Anxious/Depressed, Withdrawn/Depressed and Somatic Complaints) and four on the younger children's (Emotionally Reactive, Anxious/Depressed, Somatic Complaints, Withdrawn) can be summed to create an Internalizing problem behavior score. Two others (Rule Breaking Behavior and Aggressive Behavior on the older children's version and Attention Problems and Aggressive Behavior on the younger children's version) are used to create an Externalizing problem behavior score. The school-age version also produces a syndrome scale entitled Social Problems, which includes items not incorporated in either the Internalizing or Externalizing problem scales; it is treated as a separate outcome for the older children. It captures problems reflecting difficulties getting along or fitting in with others, such as being lonely, rejected, or bullied. Standardized age-normed *T*-scores were derived to determine whether the scores represented normal, borderline, or clinical behavior.

Background characteristics

Although the comparison group was equal with respect to having been convicted of a crime, it is reasonable to assume that mothers in prison would have generally

committed more serious offenses than the mothers with a community service sentence. Therefore, the mothers' offense type and some other mother- and family characteristics (the number of living children of the mother, the mother's place of birth and the mother's age when interviewed) were derived from the interviews to determine whether the study group and comparison group resembled each other on these characteristics, in order to be able to control for any differences. The main purpose of the interviews was to obtain information about the children. Background information of the mothers themselves was not always discussed during the interviews. Also, some mothers did not want to give the interviewers identifiable information. Therefore, for some mothers we did not obtain all background characteristics.

Analyses

Children's internalizing, externalizing and social problems as measured by the CBCL were the dependent variables. Skewness and kurtosis tests indicated distributions that did not deviate much from normal distributions. Independent variables included mothers' incarceration status (0 = incarcerated, 1 = serving community sentence), children's age (measured in years), and gender (0 = male, 1 = female). Control variables included the mother's offense type (0 = violence, 1 = non-violence), the number of living children of the mother, whether or not the mother was born in the Netherlands (0 = yes, 1 = no), and the mother's age when interviewed (measured in years).

Nested linear regression models were used to estimate the effect of maternal incarceration, age, and gender on problem behavior of children. Model 1 included the incarceration status and the control variables, while model 2 added the children's age and gender. The Quasi Likelihood under Independence Model Criterion (QIC) was used to measure goodness-of-fit. The information criteria were in small-is-better form. Results were interpreted for the model with the lowest QIC.

We controlled for clustering (multiple children per mother) using Generalized Estimating Equations (GEE) in SPSS. GEE weights each cluster of data according to the within-cluster correlation (Besemer et al., 2011; Hanley, Negassa, Edwardes, & Forrester, 2003) and assesses the significance of associations between the predictors (maternal incarceration, age and gender) and the outcome variables (internalizing and externalizing problem behavior and social problems), correcting for dependence within clusters (children of the same mothers). Internalizing and externalizing problem behavior was measured for all children, whereas social problem behavior was applicable only for the older children (6 years or older).

Separate analyses were done for preschool children (1.5-5 years) and school age (6-19 years) children to examine the differences within these age groups in problem behavior.

3.3 Results

Preliminary analyses, using box plots, showed one outlier on the social problems scale. This outcome was winsorized.

Descriptives

For an overview of the characteristics of the study group and comparison group see Table 3.1. The mean age of the children of incarcerated mothers was 9.40 ($SD = 4.76$, range 1-19 years), with 26% under the age of six. The study group sample included more boys (58%) than girls. Of the children of incarcerated mothers, 29% had a problematic score (borderline or clinical range) for internalizing problem behavior, 20% had a problematic score for externalizing problem behavior and 20% had a problematic score for social behavior problems. The mean age for children in the comparison group was 8.67 ($SD = 4.88$, range 1-18 years), with 25% under the age of six. Half the children in the comparison group were boys ($N = 28$, 51%). Of the children in the comparison group, 20% had a problematic score (borderline or clinical range) for internalizing problem behavior, 20% had a problematic score for externalizing problem behavior and 7% had a problematic score for social behavior problems.

The study group and comparison group did not differ on age ($p = .33$) or gender ($p = .35$). The mothers of the children in the study group and comparison group did not differ significantly on age ($p = .14$), number of children ($p = .09$), nor place of birth ($p = .30$), but differed significantly on whether or not they had committed a violent, property, or drugs offense ($p < .01$).

Effects of maternal incarceration, children's age and sex on problem behavior

For the entire sample, children's age was significantly and positively associated with both internalizing problem behavior and externalizing problem behavior. Neither incarceration status nor gender was associated with internalizing or externalizing problems. Children of incarcerated mothers had significantly more social problems than children of mothers serving community sentences.

When considering the age groups separately, having a criminally involved mother was associated with more externalizing problem behavior in preschool children but not in school-age children. Gender was not a significant predictor of any outcome for either age group. See Table 3.2, and 3.3a and 3.3b.

Table 3.1. *Characteristics study group and comparison group¹*

| Characteristic | Study Group | Comparison Group |
|--|---------------|------------------|
| Child's Age (in years) at time of interview | | |
| Mean (<i>SD</i>) | 9.40 (4.76) | 8.67 (4.88) |
| Range (min-max) | 1-18 | 1-18 |
| Child's sex | | |
| Male % | 58 | 51 |
| Mother's Type of offense % | | |
| Property | 14 | 75 |
| Drugs | 39 | 7 |
| Violence | 31 | 7 |
| Other | 9 | 7 |
| Missing | 7 | 4 |
| Mother's Incarceration duration at time of interview (in months) | 15.90 (20.80) | |
| Mean (<i>SD</i>) | 0.20-121 | |
| Range (min-max) | 4 | |
| Missing % | | |
| Mother's Number of living children | | |
| Mean (<i>SD</i>) | 2.26 (1.33) | 2.79 (1.83) |
| Range (min-max) | 1-7 | 1-8 |
| Mother's Country of birth | | |
| Netherlands % | 53 | 43 |
| Missing | 9 | 14 |
| Mother's Age (in years) at time of interview | | |
| Mean (<i>SD</i>) | 35 (8.00) | 38 (6.59) |
| Range (min-max) | 23-53 | 26-48 |
| Missing % | 9 | 18 |

¹ Explanatory notes to missing data. For seven incarcerated mothers (7%) we do not have information on the offense type. Four of them only completed a CBCL and did not give an interview. Two of them described the offense in broad terms and did not give detailed information. For one mother there was a language barrier. For four incarcerated mothers (4%) we do not have information on the incarceration duration. These mothers only completed a CBCL. For nine mothers (9%) we do not have information about their country of birth or their age. Four of them only completed a CBCL. For the other five it was not asked during the interview. For one mother in the comparison group (4%) we do not know the offense type because it was not asked. This also applied to four mothers in the comparison group (14%) for whom we do not have information about their country of birth and five (18%) for whom we do not have information about their age.

Table 3.2. GEE Linear Regression Models

| Variables | | Model 1 | | | Model 2 | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|----------|--------|----------|----------|--------|----------|
| | | B | Wald | <i>p</i> | B | Wald | <i>p</i> |
| Internalizing problems | Intercept | 48.57 | 85.81 | .00** | 53.32 | 101.03 | .00** |
| | Mothers' incarceration status | -2.75 | 1.18 | .28 | -1.14 | .20 | .66 |
| | <i>N</i> children | -.75 | 1.07 | .30 | -.51 | .47 | .49 |
| | Age mothers | .23 | 2.64 | .11 | -.15 | .85 | .36 |
| | Country of origin mothers | 5.94 | 6.51 | .01* | 5.57 | 5.70 | .02* |
| | Violent offense (dummy) | -5.66 | 5.05 | .03* | -6.60 | 6.83 | .01* |
| | Age children | | | | .95 | 19.49 | .00** |
| | Children's sex | | | | .16 | .01 | .92 |
| Goodness of fit | | 24945.71 | | | 22839.44 | | |
| Externalizing problems | Intercept | 51.57 | 104.59 | .00** | 54.38 | 113.01 | .00** |
| | Mothers' incarceration status | 2.74 | 1.28 | .26 | 3.55 | 2.19 | .14 |
| | <i>N</i> children | -.24 | .12 | .73 | -.14 | .04 | .84 |
| | Age mothers | .06 | .16 | .69 | -1.16 | .97 | .32 |
| | Country of birth mothers | .22 | .01 | .92 | .40 | .03 | .85 |
| | Violent offense (dummy) | -2.36 | .96 | .33 | -3.14 | 1.72 | .19 |
| | Age children | | | | .56 | 6.49 | .01** |
| | Children's sex | | | | -.73 | .20 | .66 |
| Goodness of fit | | 23097.86 | | | 22105.33 | | |
| Social problems | Intercept | 6.12 | 16.51 | .00** | 6.06 | 15.91 | .00** |
| | Mothers' incarceration status | -1.43 | 4.59 | .03* | -1.37 | 4.11 | .04* |
| | <i>N</i> children | -.12 | .44 | .51 | -.12 | .38 | .54 |
| | Age mothers | -.04 | 1.21 | .27 | -.05 | 1.36 | .24 |
| | Country of birth mothers | .71 | 1.25 | .26 | .69 | 1.15 | .28 |
| | Violent offense (dummy) | -1.18 | 3.06 | .08 | -1.23 | 3.21 | .07 |
| | Age children | | | | .03 | .19 | .66 |
| | Children's sex | | | | .07 | .02 | .90 |
| Goodness of fit | | 1048.19 | | | 1048.09 | | |

Note. For the goodness of fit the Quasi Likelihood under Independence Model Criterion (QIC) was reported. The information criteria are in small-is-better form. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table 3.3a. GEE Linear Regression Models for different age groups – preschool sample

| | | Preschool Sample Model 1 | | | Preschool Sample Model 2 | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|-------|----------|--------------------------|-------|----------|
| Variable | | B | Wald | <i>p</i> | B | Wald | <i>p</i> |
| Internalizing problems | Intercept | 42.16 | 15.88 | .00** | 46.20 | 17.18 | .00** |
| | Mothers' incarceration status | 3.74 | .58 | .45 | 5.11 | 1.02 | .31 |
| | <i>N</i> children | -2.36 | 1.42 | .23 | -2.24 | 1.22 | .27 |
| | Age mothers | .53 | 1.77 | .18 | .47 | 1.32 | .25 |
| | Country of birth mothers | 3.12 | .59 | .44 | 2.54 | .38 | .54 |
| | Violent offense (dummy) | -7.78 | 3.22 | .07 | -8.42 | 3.66 | .06 |
| | Children's sex | | | | -4.24 | 1.62 | .20 |
| Goodness of fit | | 4842.52 | | | 4793.59 | | |
| Externalizing problems | Intercept | 38.54 | 15.67 | .00** | 42.46 | 16.62 | .00** |
| | Mothers' incarceration status | 8.95 | 3.87 | .05* | 10.13 | 4.55 | .03* |
| | <i>N</i> children | -2.97 | 2.72 | .10 | -2.78 | 2.23 | .14 |
| | Age mothers | .67 | 3.34 | .07 | .59 | 2.40 | .12 |
| | Country of birth mothers | -1.85 | .26 | .61 | -2.03 | .28 | .60 |
| | Violent offense (dummy) | -5.72 | 2.11 | .15 | -6.52 | 2.53 | .11 |
| | Children's sex | | | | -3.24 | .97 | .33 |
| Goodness of fit | | 4279.41 | | | 4259.36 | | |

Note. For the goodness of fit the Quasi Likelihood under Independence Model Criterion (QIC) was reported. The information criteria are in small-is-better form. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table 3.3b. GEE Linear Regression Models for different age groups – school age sample

| | | School Age Sample Model 1 | | | School Age Sample Model 2 | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|-------|-------|---------------------------|-------|-------|
| Internalizing problems | Intercept | 53.46 | 69.27 | .00** | 53.20 | 66.81 | .00** |
| | Mothers' incarceration status | -5.16 | 3.14 | .08 | -5.12 | 3.01 | .08 |
| | <i>N</i> children | -.37 | .20 | .66 | -.40 | .23 | .64 |
| | Age mothers | .10 | .34 | .56 | .10 | .32 | .57 |
| | Country of birth mothers | 5.27 | 3.75 | .05 | 5.03 | 3.30 | .07 |
| | Violent offense (dummy) | -4.28 | 2.13 | .15 | -4.33 | 2.12 | .15 |
| | Children's sex | | | | 1.05 | .24 | .62 |
| Goodness of fit | | 18730.70 | | | 18781.79 | | |
| Externalizing problems | Intercept | 58.33 | 92.27 | .00** | 58.44 | 91.12 | .00** |
| | Mothers incarceration status | -.30 | .01 | .92 | -.29 | .01 | .92 |
| | <i>N</i> children | .08 | .01 | .92 | .09 | .01 | .91 |
| | Age mother's | -.14 | .72 | .49 | -.13 | .71 | .40 |
| | Country of birth mothers | -.29 | .01 | .91 | -.23 | .01 | .93 |
| | Violent offense (dummy) | -.81 | .08 | .77 | -.77 | .08 | .78 |
| | Children's sex | | | | -.38 | .04 | .85 |
| Goodness of fit | | 16624.61 | | | 16611.01 | | |

Note. For the goodness of fit the Quasi Likelihood under Independence Model Criterion (QIC) was reported. The information criteria are in small-is-better form. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

3.4 Discussion

Children of incarcerated mothers displayed largely similar behavior problems as children whose mothers were criminally involved but not incarcerated, with some notable differences. Social problems like experiencing loneliness and being ostracized by peers were more frequent for children whose mothers were incarcerated than for those whose mothers were serving community sentences, even when differences in background characteristics and offenses were taken into account. For externalizing problems in preschool children an opposite pattern was found: children of mothers serving community sentences fared less well. The results showed that internalizing and externalizing problem behavior in children were associated with being older, which probably reflects the high-risk nature of both groups. Possibly, older children have had more experiences with their mother's problematic life events, including involvement with the criminal justice system, regardless of whether she was incarcerated, which in turn has had an effect on their emotional wellbeing (Siegel, 2011). A developmental explanation might also be obvious: the older children's divergent development since a risky start increases, and this might not only be explained by a temporary negative reaction to the stressful situation of having a criminally involved mother.

It is an important finding that maternal incarceration was associated with social problems in the school-age children. The items that make up the social problems scale reflect problematic social relationships, like children feeling lonely, being bullied or not getting along with others (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). Qualitative interviews with children of incarcerated mothers found that it was common for some of them to keep their mother's incarceration a secret from others (Hissel et al., 2011). This guardedness may make it difficult for children to form healthy friendships and may lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness (as qualitatively reported by Bocknek et al., 2009; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). On the other hand, Hagen and Myers (2003) found that children who were more open about their parent's incarceration and had weak social support had more internalizing and externalizing problems than other children of incarcerated parents, which suggests that candor in the absence of a supportive network was associated with maladaptive behavior. More investigation into the roles of stigma and secrecy surrounding a parent's incarceration may help to elucidate their relationship to problem behaviors in children. Feelings of loneliness could also be explained by children growing up separately from their incarcerated mothers. Secure attachment relationships are developed through consistent interaction with a caregiver (Loper & Novero-Clark, 2013; Oosterman, 2007), which –given the circumstances- is problematic for children of incarcerated mothers. Several studies have linked the insecure attachment relationship with emotional problems (Groh, Roisman, Van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Fearon, 2012), behavior

problems (Fearon, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van IJzendoorn, Lapsley, & Roisman, 2010), and social competence (Barone & Lionetti, 2012).

This study adds to the literature on the effects of maternal incarceration on children in several ways. First, prior evidence of increased risk of specific problems among children of incarcerated mothers has been inconsistent because previous studies have not always used standardized measures. This research addressed this issue by using the CBCL, one of the most widely-used standardized measures for problem behavior. Results showed, consistent with findings of previous research utilizing standardized measures (Hanlon et al., 2005a; Hissel et al., 2011), that the children had elevated scores on problem behavior. Second, this research disaggregated the singular effect of imprisonment by comparing the children with an appropriate comparison group of children of criminally involved but not incarcerated mothers, whereas previous research often included comparison groups of children drawn from non-deviant populations. In doing so, we were able to show that children of incarcerated mothers had significantly more social problems than children whose criminally involved mothers were at home. Third, we controlled for several background characteristics and examined the effect of age and sex of the children on these outcomes.

Nevertheless, a few caveats are in order. First, with regard to the representativeness of the sample, we do not know whether the children of mothers who participated differed systematically from non-participants in ways that could affect the likelihood of problem behavior. Second, this study relied on the mothers' reports of children's problem behavior. Previous research has indicated that incarcerated mothers underestimate children's problem behavior when compared to reports by children's caregivers and children themselves (Hissel et al., 2011). Possibly, incarcerated mothers had less opportunity to observe the kinds of behaviors that go into the external problems scale, such as rule-breaking and aggressive behavior, especially because the only face-to-face contact mothers have with their children takes place when they visit, in a controlled environment that might intimidate children, causing them to behave better than they would in other settings. Furthermore, children do not always inform their mothers about their problems because they do not want to upset her (Hissel et al., 2011). This may lead incarcerated mothers to underestimate the extent of children's behaviors, especially if their relationship with the child's caregiver is such that they communicate poorly and infrequently. Therefore, this study may present an overly positive picture of problem behavior of children of incarcerated mothers. Future research should aim to include measures from caregivers and children and possibly teachers as well. Third, although families with criminally involved mothers in the comparison group are probably more similar than others to the families of incarcerated mothers in terms of life events, mothers with a community service sentence typically have committed less serious offenses than incarcerated mothers.

This study controlled for severity of offense, but it is possible that families in which the mother was sentenced to prison experienced more problems before the mother's conviction than the families in the comparison group. Future research should therefore include additional measures for the mother's deviant behavior, such as her prior offenses and substance abuse history. In the Netherlands, people generally are incarcerated only for severe crimes. Thus, maternal incarceration in the Netherlands is probably more exceptional than in the US where most prior research has been conducted. Possibly, Dutch children of incarcerated mothers who are familiar with their mother's offense might suffer from the knowledge that their mother committed an offense serious enough to result in imprisonment. We assume that families with mothers serving community sentences is most suitable as a comparison group. However, ideally, future research should correct for even more factors than we have done so far, such as the caregiving situation of the children (e.g. disruptions in caregiving) to further rule out the influence of confounders.

This research has implications for policy and practice. In general, both the children in the study group and in the comparison group had elevated scores on problem behavior and require attention from policy makers and professionals. There are more and more initiatives to support children of incarcerated parents, most often through local or national activities by non-profit organizations. For example, volunteers assist families with logistical problems by providing transportation so children can visit their mothers in prison. Also, parenting interventions for incarcerated and recently released mothers (and fathers) have been developed (Eddy, Martinez, & Burraston, 2013; Menting, 2012). In addition, the problems of these children (and their families) have also drawn the attention of large international organizations and intergovernmental organizations (IGO's). For instance, the U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child dedicated a General Day of Discussion (DGD) to children of incarcerated parents in 2011 (see Quaker United Nations Office report by Robertson, 2012). Also, in the US, the federal government has created the Federal Interagency Working Group for Children of Incarcerated Parents, composed of five governmental departments, including the Departments of Justice and Health and Human Services, and the Social Security Administration. This initiative was launched in 2013 to work towards opportunities to support these children and their caregivers (Justice Center, 2013). Given the fact that more and more programs are being developed and that these vulnerable children should be effectively assisted, it is important that programs are evidence-based. The findings of this research indicate that programs need to tailor their services to different age groups of children with criminally involved mothers. Special attention should be paid to social obstacles for children of incarcerated mothers.

Chapter

4

Dynamics in the caregiving situation of children of incarcerated mothers

This chapter is an extended version of a chapter accepted for publication:

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Abstract

Children of incarcerated mothers are a disadvantaged group. For scientific as well as practical reasons, it is important to determine how exactly incarceration may be associated with adversity. This study focused on caregiving instability before and starting from maternal incarceration in order to determine whether maternal incarceration is a risk factor or a risk marker. A mixed quantitative/qualitative approach was used. The results demonstrated that the lives of these children were characterized by instability, not only starting from the incarceration but also in the period before. Incarceration was associated with a further cascading of changes in caregivers and residential moves. Based on content analyses of interviews with incarcerated mothers, caregivers and children, several patterns were distinguished.

4.1 Introduction

The worldwide increase in imprisonment rates over the past several decades (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2011; Walmsley, 2012) has resulted in a growing number of children facing parental imprisonment (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Numerous studies have shown that children of incarcerated parents have an increased risk of internalizing and externalizing problem behavior compared to children without imprisoned parents (e.g., Hagen, Myers, & Mackintosh, 2005; Hissel, Bijleveld, & Kruttschnitt, 2011; Murray & Farrington, 2005; Murray, Farrington, Sekol, & Olsen, 2009).

One perspective on these problem behaviors is that maternal incarceration has direct risk effects (Murray & Farrington, 2005; Murray & Farrington, 2008a). These effects include changes in children's caregiving situation (Phillips, Erkanli, Keeler, Costello, & Angold, 2006; Poehlmann, 2005b) as well as children's emotional response to separation from the parent, shame felt by children for what happened, loss of family income, and breakdown of the social network (Murray et al., 2009). However, families in which mothers are incarcerated may already be facing a heightened number of risk factors (Phillips, Burns, Wagner, Kramer, & Robbins, 2002). In their paper on the effects of maternal imprisonment, Wildeman and Turney (2014) suggest that children's problem behavior should be attributed to disadvantages prior to maternal incarceration rather than the incarceration itself. Thus, a second perspective on developmental risk is that incarceration serves as a marker for heightened risk exposure rather than a risk in and of itself (Murray & Farrington, 2005; Murray et al., 2009).

Presumably the changing caregiving situation of children of incarcerated mothers is an important variable (Dallaire, 2007). More often than is the case with incarcerated fathers, incarcerated mothers were the sole caregivers for their children before the incarceration (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008, Loper, Carlson, Levitt, & Scheffel, 2009). Thus, the incarceration of a mother might create greater disruption in the family than the incarceration of a father (Phillips et al., 2006; Tasca, Rodriguez, & Zatz, 2011), resulting in a different impact on the children (Murray & Farrington, 2008a). However, some authors have noted that caregiving instability may also *precede* the incarceration because some of these children were already living apart from their mothers prior to incarceration or were exposed to new partners of the mother, to step- and half-siblings moving in and out or to frequent residential moves (Hissel et al., 2011; Myers, 1999; Ross, Khashu & Wamsley, 2004; Philips et al., 2002; Siegel, 2011). However, empirical evidence on the association between maternal incarceration and caregiving instability is limited.

To investigate both perspectives on incarceration as a risk factor or a risk marker (Murray & Farrington, 2005), this study focused on instability in the caregiving

arrangement of children of incarcerated mothers. According to Tasca and her colleagues (2011), who studied caregiving instability in the context of parental incarceration in the United States, it is important to distinguish between caregiving instability due to residential changes and instability due to changes in primary caregivers. Questions in this study therefore addressed the number and sequence of changes in residence and primary caregivers for children whose mothers are incarcerated, and the nature and context of these changes. Possible differences in instability from before incarceration to the period of incarceration were considered.

The effects of caregiving disruptions may be different between a country such as the United States, where prison sentences are relatively long and the financial and social corollaries of imprisonment are severe, and other countries. In the Netherlands, for example, prison sentences are much shorter and a relatively generous social safety net is available for prisoners' relatives. It is important that the effects of maternal incarceration are studied not only in countries with severe imprisonment climates but also in those with milder ones because relatively short sentences and strong social welfare nets may be insufficient to offset the risks of incarceration for children.

Parental incarceration as a possible risk factor

Findings are mixed when it comes to the association between parental incarceration and children's problem behaviors. Moreover, the interpretation of these findings is complicated because existing studies have measured different risk factors (Murray, Loeber, & Pardini, 2012). Some studies have shown a direct association between the incarceration of parents and problem behavior in the children, irrespective of other confounders. Wildeman (2010) found an association between paternal incarceration and physical aggression in sons. Wakefield and Wildeman (2011) showed that paternal incarceration resulted in children being worse off (with regard to both emotional and behavior problems), although these children were having problems before the incarceration. In contrast, Shlafer, Poehlmann, and Donelan-McCall (2012) concluded that children's antisocial outcomes were not related to maternal incarceration when other risk factors were held constant. Van de Rakt, Murray, and Nieuwbeerta (2011) also found no associations between paternal incarceration and the criminal careers of children in the Netherlands. These different outcomes may be related to the risk factors being studied. Murray, Loeber, and Pardini (2012) found that parental incarceration was associated with some (youth theft) but not all (depression, marijuana use, poor academic performance) kinds of problem behavior in children (see also Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012). Because most (although not all) research considered children of incarcerated fathers (e.g., Wildeman, 2010; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2011; but see Murray et al., 2012a) or did not control for

parent gender (Phillips et al., 2006), the risks for children of incarcerated mothers are even less clear (Wildeman et al., 2013).

Some studies regarded caretaking-related problems of children of incarcerated parents (Hanlon, Carswell, & Rose, 2007). However, many of these studies focused on subgroups, often consisting of children of African-American mothers. This is not surprising because these women are overrepresented in the American criminal justice system (Turanovic, Rodriguez, & Pratt, 2012). Hanlon, O'Grady, Bennett-Sears, and Callaman (2005), and Smith, Krisman, Strozier, and Marley (2004) found few disruptions in the lives of children of incarcerated substance-abusing parents because a kinship caregiver, most often the (maternal) grandmother, was already involved in the upbringing of the children. Thus, these caregivers played an important and stable role in the children's lives, both before and starting from the incarceration of the mother. This continuity of care might mitigate the negative effects of incarceration (Hanlon et al., 2005a; Hanlon et al., 2007). These findings are consistent with the conclusion of Turanovic and her colleagues (2012). They found that in those families where the incarcerated parents had been inconsistently involved or completely absent in the children's lives before the incarceration, caregivers experienced no changes or even positive effects of the parental incarceration. However, most of the children in these studies resided with their (maternal) grandparents, which does not represent the caregiving situation of all or even the majority of children of incarcerated mothers. In the US, 58% of children of incarcerated mothers were cared for by other caregivers than the maternal grandmothers (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). In the Netherlands, an even higher percentage of 87% of children of incarcerated mothers were cared for by other caregivers than the maternal grandmother (Hissel et al., 2011).

In addition to disruptions in caregiving relationships, incarceration is also likely to disrupt children's familiar living arrangements. Phillips and her colleagues (2006) found that residential instability was significantly associated with parental incarceration. However, these authors underscore that they did not control for parent gender. Geller, Garfinkel, Cooper, and Mincy (2009) used data from the Fragile Families Studies to compare a sample of children with incarcerated parents with children of non-incarcerated parents of the same age and living in the same US cities. They found that children of incarcerated mothers (and also fathers) faced significantly more residential instability than their counterparts. However, they did not explicitly consider whether the extent of instability in children's lives differed between the period preceding, and the period after the start of parental incarceration.

Parental incarceration as a possible risk marker

Recent studies emphasized the need for understanding the situation *before* the incarceration in explaining the impact of incarceration on the children's lives (Murray et al., 2012b; Turanovic et al., 2012). Without knowledge of pre-existing disadvantages, the net effect of parental incarceration cannot be studied. Therefore, Murray and his colleagues (2012b) suggested that we should "treat parental incarceration as a life event and to use time-ordered data to examine its effects on children" (p. 262). Tasca and her colleagues (2011) provided the only study we are aware of that examined both caregiving instability prior to, and after, incarceration. They found that maternal incarceration almost invariably disrupted children's caregiving arrangements. Residential instability *following* the maternal incarceration was significantly related to rearrest among youth in the juvenile justice system, but changes in caregivers were not. Caregiving instability *before* the maternal incarceration did not appear to influence the possibility of rearrest among these youths. However, their study of children of incarcerated parents was restricted to children who were already involved in the juvenile justice system. As such, it does not reflect all children of incarcerated mothers, some of whom may be doing quite well (see e.g., Hissel et al., 2011).

Caregiver and residential instability in a developmental perspective

Several literature reviews have stressed the theoretical association between caregiving disruptions and negative outcomes in children of incarcerated mothers (Dallaire, 2007; Myers, 1999). However, empirical evidence of this association is lacking (Murray et al., 2009). For example, while it would be reasonable to expect that separations from primary caregivers would impact the children's attachment security (Bowlby, 1969, 1973), empirical evidence with regard to caregiving instability and attachment insecurity is not available for children of incarcerated mothers. Nevertheless, most children of incarcerated mothers had insecure relationships with their mothers and their caregivers, characterized by ambivalence, disorganization, violence, or detachment (Poehlmann, 2005b). Meta-analyses have shown that, in general, attachment insecurity is associated with problem behavior in children (Fearon, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van IJzendoorn, Lapsley, & Roisman, 2010; Groh, Roisman, Van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Fearon, 2012). Moreover, even the disruption of changing caregivers itself might affect children's well-being (Schuengel, Oosterman, & Sterkenburg, 2009). Conversely, a stable caregiver situation is seen as a promotive factor in children's well-being because remaining with the same caregiver contributes to attachment security (Murray and Murray,

2010; Poehlmann, 2005b). Thus, children who change caregivers less often might have less problem behavior than children who are exposed to frequent caregiving disruptions. In a sample of low-income adolescents, the number of residential moves predicted adolescent adjustment problems independently of the effect of the number of separations from caregivers (Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002). However, to what extent and how caregiving instability occurs in the lives of children of incarcerated mothers is still insufficiently known.

4.2 Current study

The current study investigated caregiver and residential instability, distinguishing between instability before and during incarceration. The study took place in a country with a mild imprisonment climate and strong social welfare provision. A mixed quantitative/qualitative methodological approach allowed us to study the extent to which caregiving instability is influenced by maternal incarceration and in what way. First we examined the number of changes in residence and primary caregivers for children whose mothers were incarcerated. Second, we looked at the sequence of these changes over time, by comparing the situation before and after the start of the incarceration. Third we considered the nature and context of these changes.

4.3 Method

Sample

The sample in this study included information on 65 children obtained from 37 different mothers. For 33 of the 65 children, the current caregiver gave information as well, and 28 of the 65 children also gave information themselves. Table 4.1 gives further details about sample characteristics of the current study.

Table 4.1. *Sample characteristics of children*

| Characteristics | Statistics |
|--|----------------|
| Age | |
| Mean (<i>SD</i>) | 8.71 (5.17) |
| Range | 0-18 |
| Sex; <i>N</i> (%) | |
| Boys | 32 (49%) |
| Type of Caregiver; <i>N</i> (%) | |
| Father | 20 (31%) |
| Family or friends | 22 (34%) |
| Foster parent(s) | 18 (28%) |
| Institutions | 5 (8%) |
| Mother living with children prior to incarceration; <i>N</i> (%) | 48 (74%) |
| Time period (in months) separated from mother because of incarceration (for children living with mother prior to incarceration and measured at time of interview mother) | 20.72 (22.94); |
| Mean (<i>SD</i>); Median | 13 |
| Range | .5-112 |

Procedure

Study recruitment took place between 2008 and 2012. To increase validity, data triangulation (Guion, 2002) was achieved by interviewing incarcerated mothers, their children, and the current caregivers of the children. Incarcerated mothers from the regular units of all penitentiary centers for females in the Netherlands were approached (between 2008-2009 the Netherlands had four women's prisons and between 2010-2012 there were five women's prisons). Through the penitentiary staff, incarcerated mothers with underage children were invited to attend an introductory meeting where we explained our research and asked them to participate⁷. Mothers who agreed to participate had to sign an informed consent, after which in-depth interviews were conducted and questionnaires were administered. If the mothers gave permission, the current caregivers of the children were approached for in-depth interviews and questionnaires as well. The children were also interviewed if, following the above, they themselves agreed and both their mother and their current

⁷ In the first two prisons where we recruited we excluded children who were residing abroad. However, in the first interviews it became apparent that children residing abroad formed a considerable proportion of the children of mothers who were incarcerated in the Netherlands. Because obviously these children are as important as children residing in the Netherlands, this exclusion criterion was no longer applied in subsequent study recruitment. However, due to practical reasons, it was not possible to interview caregivers and children abroad. Therefore, for these children we only have information from the mother.

caregiver signed an informed consent. Children aged twelve or above also signed an informed consent themselves. Using this sequential approach, we found that not all mothers would give us the contact details of their children's caregivers or permission to approach their children, nor did all caregivers and children agree to participate or fulfill the interview appointment. More information was obtained from mothers than from current caregivers or children. A setting was provided where the respondents could speak confidentially. For the incarcerated mothers this was in their cell, in a visiting room or office within the prison; for the children and caregivers this was at home. Interviews were administered by trained researchers.

Respondents were given a participant fee with a value of 10 euro for mothers and children and 20 euro for caregivers. Permission for the study was obtained from the Netherlands Department of Correctional Services (DJI). The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Law at the VU University approved the data collection protocol.

A note on representativeness and response of the sample

The sample is part of the larger "Children of Incarcerated Mothers in the Netherlands Study (CIM-NL Study)" in which 124 mothers gave information about the well-being of a total of 255 children and filled in questionnaires about children's problem behavior (Child Behavior Check List; CBCL) and answered questions about their (co-)parenting behavior. For this study we used a subsample of respondents with as many complete case studies as was possible, including information from multiple respondents or both interview and CBCL information. This latter information was used to consider the representativeness of the sample in this study compared to the larger sample of the CIM-NL Study. The children in this sample did not differ significantly from the other children in the larger study on internalizing problems ($t(160) = .99, p = .72$), externalizing problems ($t(160) = .32, p = .99$) or the total score of problem behavior ($t(160) = .25, p = .66$). This may be an indication that the sample in this study is representative with regard to the larger sample of the CIM-NL Study.

With regard to the response rate of the CIM-NL Sample, it is not possible to indicate precisely what percentage of mothers meeting the inclusion criteria finally responded. There is no system for registering whether prisoners have children and women do not always inform the police or prison employees that they have children. Most probably, some mothers having underage children did not come to the introduction meeting. Some women who attended the introduction meeting did not meet the inclusion criteria and had children older than 18 years of age. Some of the approached mothers refused to participate without providing specified reasons. Some of them decided to leave the meeting without agreeing to participate and some of them agreed to participate but told the prison employees afterwards that

they changed their minds and did not want to be interviewed. The opposite was also true. Some mothers who decided not to come to the introductory meeting heard positive stories from mothers who did participate and decided to participate after all. Some mothers who agreed to participate could not be interviewed because they were transferred to another prison, were released, or were placed in solitary confinement. This information makes it impossible to give detailed information about (non-) response rate.

Measures

Several life events were discussed in the interviews, including changes in caregivers, residential moves, and other changes in (relation to) the caregiving situation, such as new partners of the mother and school changes. To establish caregiving instability, the respondents' reports of the number of changes in primary caregivers and the number of residential moves both before and after the start of the incarceration were used. With regard to changes in primary caregivers, a change was listed only if the primary caregiver was no longer involved with the daily care of the child. In case of two primary caregivers (e.g., a nuclear family), no change was listed as long as one of the primary caregivers was involved with the daily care of the child (e.g., if the father continued to care for the children when mother was incarcerated). The moving in of a new partner of the primary caregiver was not listed as a change in case the primary caregiver was still there. In all likelihood, the degree of caregiving instability is underestimated due to loss of information based on memory and willingness to report. For one child there was a lack of clarity in the number of residential moves as reported by the mother and by the current caregiver. For the quantitative analyses we relied on the lowest reported number (given by the mother); thus using the most conservative measure of caregiving instability. The other narratives did not contradict the mothers' accounts. Sometimes the information from the two sources was complementary. For example, mothers could give more details about the caregiving situation prior to the incarceration whereas caregivers were more detailed about the caregiving situation after the start of mother's incarceration.

Analyses

Quantitative analyses

With quantitative content analyses, the number of changes in primary caregivers and changes in residence were derived from the interview reports. Reports were analyzed by a research assistant who mapped life histories with regard to changes in caregivers and residential changes. Then, the first author confirmed these histories and refined

the mappings by analyzing whether a change in caregiver also meant a change in *primary* caregiver (as defined above) and which caregiver- and residential changes were the direct consequences of the mothers' incarceration. According to Silverman (2006), this sequential approach ensures an accurate data analyses and contributes to the validity of the results (Lindegaard, Miller, & Reynald, 2013). Preliminary analyses showed that variables regarding changes in caregivers and residential changes were not normally distributed. Therefore non-parametric tests were used for comparing differences.

Simple frequency analyses were used to determine the changes in residence and primary caregivers. With a Mann-Whitney U test, we examined whether children who were living with their mother until she became incarcerated differed from children who were not living with their mother prior to the incarceration (0 = living with mother, 1 = not living with mother). To compare differences in instability prior to and after the start of the incarceration, only those children who lived with their mother until she became incarcerated were included. The yearly number of changes in primary caregiver and residence were compared, with Wilcoxon Signed-ranks tests, controlling for age of the children and time already served. Different paths were distinguished by comparing these adjusted numbers of changes before the incarceration with adjusted numbers of changes since the start of the incarceration.

Qualitative analyses

The semi-structured interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Then, the interviews were analyzed through a cyclic process of repeated readings to identify themes in the children's lives (Siegel, 2011). Although the existing literature does reveal topics with regard to caregiving instability in the lives of children of incarcerated mothers (for example the absence of the mother, separation from siblings or school changes), these studies have not examined time-ordered data to consider the parental incarceration as an indicator for change; thus theory with regard to instability over time is very limited. Therefore, a mixed inductive/deductive analytical approach was used in identifying the themes.

Through continuous comparison of data, categories were identified of children with similar patterns of caregiving instability. Whenever a new topic or pattern was identified, the reports were reconsidered in order to determine whether this could be applied to other (subgroups of) children in this sample. As is conventional in a qualitative approach, the examining of disconfirming evidence was a key principle in the analyses. If needed, categories were altered. The possibility of examining the narratives of multiple informants (mother, caregiver, child) was an important advantage in this process. The patterns uncovered by this process were illustrated with short vignettes. These vignettes were explicitly altered with regard to details

nonessential to the research questions so that the children remained anonymous. All names used in this chapter are fictional.

4.4 Results

Changes in primary caregivers and residential changes

The average number of changes in primary caregiver experienced by children of incarcerated mothers was 2.02 ($N = 65$, $SD = 1.95$) over their life course. More than half of the children (55%) changed primary caregiver two or more times in their lives. The yearly rate of caregiver change averaged 0.35 ($SD = 0.41$), showing that these children experienced a change in primary caregiver roughly every three years.

The average number of residential moves experienced by children of incarcerated mothers was 3.53 ($N = 62$, $SD = 3.40$) over their life course. Approximately half of the children (53%) changed residence three times or more in their lives. The yearly rate of residential moves was 0.60 ($SD = .75$) on average, meaning that these children moved a little under every two years. This is about five to six times higher than the national average of, roughly, once every 10 years (Statistics Netherlands, 2013). See Table 4.2 for detailed information about the number of changes.

Table 4.2. *Changes in children's lives*

| | Changes in caregivers | | Residential changes | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-----|---------------------|-----|
| | <i>N</i> | % | <i>N</i> | % |
| 0 changes | 11 | 17 | 2 | 3 |
| 1 change | 18 | 28 | 13 | 21 |
| 2 changes | 17 | 26 | 14 | 23 |
| 3 changes | 9 | 14 | 5 | 8 |
| 4 or more changes | 10 | 15 | 28 | 45 |
| Total | 65 | 100 | 62 | 100 |

Children who were not living with their mother prior to the incarceration experienced significantly more changes in primary caregiver than children who stayed with their mother until she became incarcerated ($Z = -2.49$, $p = .01$). They also experienced more residential changes ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 6.02$ compared to $M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.94$), but this difference was not significant ($p = .26$).

Differences in instability before and after the start of the incarceration

For the children who stayed with their mother until she became incarcerated, we examined the number of changes before and since the incarceration of the mother. Before the incarceration, 94% of the children never changed primary caregiver and the remaining three children (6%) changed primary caregiver only once. From incarceration, three out of every four children ($N = 36$; 75%) changed primary caregiver. The children who did not change primary caregiver were cared for by two caregivers before the incarceration and remained with the other caregiver. For those children for whom mother was the sole caregiver, a change in primary caregiver is obvious when mother gets incarcerated. However, only 15 children (31%) changed once and 21 children (44%) experienced multiple changes in caregiver. See Table 3 for an overview of changes before and after the start of mother's incarceration. Adjusting for differences in time before and after the start of incarceration, the average rate of caregiver change was 0.01 ($SD = 0.02$) before and 1.73 ($SD = 2.37$) after the start of the incarceration. This difference was significant ($Z = -5.07$, $p = .00$).

Before the mother's incarceration, about a quarter of the children (23%) had never changed residence. Half of the children (52%) had changed residence once or twice and the remainder (26%) three times or more. Following the mother's incarceration, 30% did not change residence. These children stayed together with their current caregiver in the same house where they had lived with their mother. Almost a quarter of the children (23%) changed residence once, about a fifth (21%) changed twice, and the remainder (26%) changed three or more times since the start of the incarceration. Adjusting for differences in time length, the average yearly rate was 0.58 ($SD = 1.13$) changes before and 1.65 ($SD = 2.40$) changes per year after the start of the mother's incarceration. This difference was significant ($Z = -2.59$, $p = .01$). See Table 4.3.

Table 4.3. *Changes before and starting from maternal incarceration*

| | Caregiver changes before incarceration | | Caregiver changes since start incarceration | | Residential changes before incarceration | | Residential changes since start incarceration | |
|-------------------|--|-----|---|-----|--|-----|---|-----|
| | <i>N</i> | % | <i>N</i> | % | <i>N</i> | % | <i>N</i> | % |
| 0 changes | 45 | 94 | 12 | 25 | 10 | 23 | 14 | 30 |
| 1 change | 3 | 6 | 15 | 31 | 17 | 40 | 11 | 23 |
| 2 changes | 0 | 0 | 10 | 21 | 5 | 12 | 10 | 21 |
| 3 changes | 0 | 0 | 3 | 6 | 8 | 19 | 4 | 9 |
| 4 or more changes | 0 | 0 | 8 | 17 | 3 | 7 | 8 | 17 |
| Total | 48 | 100 | 48 | 100 | 43 | 100 | 47 | 100 |

For those children whose mother was the single caregiver, the mother's incarceration necessarily resulted in a change in primary caregiver. Excluding those changes in caregiver that occurred by necessity because of the incarceration, the average yearly rate of caregiver change was 0.77 ($SD = 1.58$) since the start of the incarceration, which was still a significant difference from the situation before the incarceration ($Z = -4.26, p = .00$). Excluding those residential changes that were the direct result of the incarceration, the average yearly rate of residential change was 0.85 ($SD = 1.63$) since the start of the incarceration, which was not significantly different from the situation before the incarceration ($Z = -.84, p = .40$).

The increase in caregiver changes since the start of the incarceration could also be due to temporary "turbulence" right after a mother's incarceration when children need to be found new homes. Therefore, we separately examined children who had been separated from their mothers for more than a year, because the median time the mothers were separated from their children due to the incarceration was approximately one year ($Mdn = 13.00$ months). The results remained the same. For primary caregiver instability, the difference remained significant both for including and excluding the changes in caregiver that were the direct result of the incarceration ($Z = -4.17, p = .00$ and $Z = -3.69, p = .00$, respectively). For residential moves the difference was only significant when those residential changes that were the direct result of the incarceration were included ($Z = -3.00, p = .00$) but marginally significant when excluding these changes ($Z = -1.83, p = .07$).

There was a significant and positive correlation between the overall number of changes in primary caregivers and the number of residential changes ($r = .40, p = .01$). There was no significant association between caregiver instability and residential instability before the incarceration, but there was a strong and highly significant association between caregiver and residential instability starting from incarceration ($r = .97, p = .00$). This shows that, after a mother's incarceration, almost every primary caregiver change is accompanied by a residential change.

Paths to stability/instability

For distinguishing different paths to stability and instability, we chose changes in primary caregiver as the main classifying criterion because we considered changes in primary caregiver to be by definition disruptive.

Three paths were distinguished. First, the largest group of children comprised those for whom the incarceration of their mother was associated with a pathway towards more instability ($N = 36, 75\%$). That is, these children experienced more instability post- than pre-incarceration in their caregiving situation. A second group of children included those for whom the incarceration of the mother was not associated with

changes in caregivers ($N = 11$, 23%). Thus, since the start of the incarceration they did not experience an increase or decrease in instability in their caregiving situation. For one child the incarceration of the mother was associated with a pathway towards greater stability in caregivers, implying that this child experienced more instability pre- than post-incarceration of the mother.

Nature and context of instability in the children's lives

As explained in the quantitative results, most children experienced more changes in primary caregiver and residence starting from their mothers' incarceration than before the incarceration. Content analyses revealed a more sophisticated understanding of instability in these children's lives. Different patterns were distinguished.

Incarceration as a clear turning point: from stability to instability ($N = 15$ children)

A first subgroup of children emerged whose living situation before the mother's incarceration was fairly quiet. These children lived with their mother until she was incarcerated and until then they did not experience any changes in primary caregiver. For some of them, the mother may have had one or more partners moving in and out, but she was consistently present as the primary caregiver. Most of them never changed residence or only one time (a single child moved twice). However, when mothers became incarcerated, these children started to experience multiple changes in primary caregivers, including both kinship care and foster care. One child was a co-perpetrator of his mother's offense and was placed in a juvenile institution, which we also considered as a change in caregiving situation. Also, three children experienced only one change in primary caregiver. For these three however, this change in caregiver was accompanied by so many other disruptions (for example, having broken contact with siblings, school changes) that they were best classified within this group. Many of the children in this group seemed to live in a stable caregiving situation by the time of interviewing. However, the pathway to this situation was characterized by much instability, mainly because of changing caregivers but also because of separation from siblings, new partners of parents, frequent residential moves or school changes. The case of Alice and Bryan illustrated how these children were moved from place to place after their mothers were incarcerated.

Bryan and Alice were five and two years old when their mother got incarcerated for killing their father. Mother qualified the family as just an average family, although she mentioned the quarrels with her deceased husband. She was a permanent caregiver for her two children. They moved home only once before the incarceration of the mother. However, there had been some disturbances and for a while mother

was the sole caregiver. Bryan had witnessed his parents having arguments and had spoken about this with his mother and current foster mother. He was still impressed by discussions. Because of her young age, it was unknown to what extent Alice had witnessed her parents having arguments. Moreover, there was an older stepson who had been involved with the police after which the police searched their house. The children were at home when mother killed father but had not witnessed this.

The mother had brought Bryan and Alice to their grandmother, whom they had never previously met, just before turning herself in to the police. The two children lived with their grandmother for a couple of weeks, and then they were placed with relatives for a few weeks. Then, the two children were separated for a substantial period. Bryan was placed in a foster home. Alice had to live in a shelter home but finally ended up in the same foster home as her brother. There was good contact between the foster parents and the mother. The foster mother rather described herself as a 'caregiver' than as a mother, because she knew that the intention was to reunify the children with their mother after release. Bryan had to change school because of the new living situation; Alice had not started school at the time her mother got incarcerated.

Incarceration as an accelerator: more instability (N = 9 children)

Some children also lived with their mother until she became incarcerated and most of them did not experience any changes in primary caregiver prior to the incarceration. However, as became clear from the case studies, the caregiving situation before the incarceration was instable because of other changes. However, this instability was exacerbated when their mothers' were incarcerated.

Nick was fifteen years old when he was interviewed. He explained in detail which changes he had experienced. The first years of his life he lived with his family in Curacao. When his mother went to the Netherlands for work, he stayed with his biological father. Then, his parents got divorced because his mother had met someone else. His mother remarried. When he was eight years old Nick came to live in the Netherlands, together with his mother, stepfather and sisters. His stepfather mentioned that Nick's mother used to drink a lot and could be very aggressive although she never attacked Nick.

When his mother got incarcerated Nick stayed with his stepfather, younger sister and a niece of his mother who was living with them and with whom his stepfather began a relationship. When Nick was accused of theft his stepfather did not want him to live with them any longer. Nick had to move to his older sister, who lived on her own by then. He had to live in another neighborhood but could remain at the same school. However, he rarely saw his younger sister anymore. Also, for the last couple of months he could not visit his imprisoned mother, because the prison was too far away.

Whether the incarceration of the mother was a 'turning point' or an 'accelerator' for instability could differ between children in the same family. Take for example the two brothers Peter and Andrew. Both boys experienced four changes in primary caregiver since their mother's incarceration. For Peter, the oldest, the incarceration accelerated caregiving instability. Before the incarceration he experienced some disturbances in his caregiving situation: a residential move from abroad to the Netherlands, the absence of his father after the divorce of his parents and a new partner of his mother moving in. This differed from the living situation of his younger brother Andrew, who was a child of the mother's new partner and never experienced any changes in caregiving arrangement before the incarceration. For him, the incarceration could be seen as turning point: from a stable to an unstable caregiving situation.

Changes in the caregiving situation without much impact (N = 8 children)

For this subgroup of children, the incarceration of the mother resulted in a change in primary caregiver, but only one change took place. Most of these children lived with their grandparents since their mother's incarceration. In fact, some grandparents already supported the mother in the upbringing of the children and some mothers and children had lived with the maternal grandparents before the incarceration. Some of them had experienced other changes in their caregiving arrangement before the incarceration (e.g., a new partner of the mother moving in). However, their mothers were constantly present as a primary caregiver before the incarceration (except for one child who lived alternatingly with his father and mother after his parents were divorced). See, for example, the case of Melinda.

Melinda was five years old. Her mother got incarcerated when she was still a baby. As a result, Melinda moved in with her grandparents, and the three of them - Melinda, grandpa, and grandma - stayed together. She lived a regular life, visited her mother in prison, and saw both her mother and her grandparents as parents. Melinda was an only child. Her father never played a role in her life. When her mother discovered she was pregnant, she decided to raise the child by herself because she regarded the father as an unsuitable role model. As far as known, Melinda did not change school.

Another example is Jeffrey, six years old. He had lived with his grandparents since he was a toddler.

Already before the incarceration of Jeffrey's mother, his grandparents were quite involved with the caregiving. There were no disturbances reported in the caregiving situation before the mother's incarceration. During the incarceration, the mother was involved with childrearing. Jeffrey had daily phone contact with her and visited

her in prison. He also took her into confidence and wanted to live with her after release. According to his mother, the new caregiving situation was sometimes difficult for Jeffrey because the grandparents used to have the grandparent role and now they were the daily caregivers. His father was never involved in the upbringing of Jeffrey. About his grandfather Jeffrey said “grandpa is also a little bit my father”. He never changed school. He had no brothers and sisters.

No changes: father as a stable caregiver (N = 11 children)

The children for whom the mother’s incarceration had the least impact in terms of instability all lived with their father, who was present both before and after the start of the mother’s incarceration. Regardless of whether the mother’s offense had an impact on these children’s well-being (for about half of the children the mother committed interpersonal violence, for the other half the mother was incarcerated for drug offenses or unpaid fines), they did not experience any notable changes in their caregiving arrangement apart from the change caused by the incarceration of their mother.

Esther was fifteen years old. She was an only child, lived with her mother and father, and never changed residence. Her parents still had a relationship. Since her mother was incarcerated, half a year ago, Esther and her father had lived together in the same house as they did before. Esther did not change school. She did visit her mother in prison.

Towards stability (N = 5 children)

This subgroup of children also lived with their mother until she was incarcerated and had to change caregiver as a consequence of the incarceration (two lived in a foster family, one in an institution, one with his stepfather, one with his grandmother). However, what became clear from the case studies was that –except for one of these children for whom it already became clear from the quantitative analyses- the stability in the caregiving situation before the incarceration, as measured by the quantitative analyses, seemed to be overestimated. Actually, the children lived in a turbulent caregiving environment although their mother was present. They experienced so many other changes in their caregiving situation before the incarceration (e.g., frequent moves and relatives who moved in and out), that the caregiving situation had in fact become more stable since the start of the mother’s incarceration. See for example Chris.

Chris was three years old. Although his mother was consistently present in his life before she was incarcerated, there were many disturbances because they lived in

relatively chaotic circumstances. Chris changed residence many times, sometimes living with friends of his mother and then moving to another place again. He did not have to attend school yet. His mother spent time in prison many times before Chris was born and, according to Chris' grandmother, had difficulties living a stable life. Since his mother was incarcerated, almost three months ago, Chris had lived with his grandmother and experienced no more residential changes. He had his own bedroom, and his grandmother emphasized the regularity of routines in rearing him. Chris had never had any contact with his father, who took off when he found out that Chris' mother was pregnant.

Children not living with their mother prior to the incarceration (N = 17 children)

The narratives of children who were not living with their mother prior to the incarceration revealed that these children were among the most problematic in this sample with regard to instability in their caregiving situation. As became clear from their stories, instability was highly common during the time they were living with their mother. A path to greater stability was (at least) embarked upon from the moment they were living in the current caregiving situation. Six children were living with their father, six in foster care, three with family and two in an institution. The stories of two children, one living in foster care and one living with father, were good examples of what happened in the lives of these children. The information about Krista was obtained from her biological mother and her foster mother. Krista herself was deemed too vulnerable to participate in an interview (according to professionals and her foster mother).

Krista was eight years old and the middle child in a row of five. They were all living in different families. Krista had experienced a highly problematic caregiving situation during the time she lived with her biological parents. She was taken away from her parents when she was almost four years old. The parents were addicted to drugs and frequently left their children behind when using drugs or whenever they were involved with criminal activity. During the first years of her life, Krista lived alternately in childcare institutions or with her parents. When she was around five years old she was placed in a children's home, then in another foster home and then in this current foster home. The foster mother obtained most of her information about Krista's past from the police, Youth Care and the caregivers of the other children (one of the siblings lived with an aunt). Krista had seen her biological parents a few times since she lived with her foster parents although her parents not always showed up at meetings organized by Youth Care. The foster mother thought that Krista had enjoyed the meetings with her parents and disliked it whenever they did not show up. According to the foster mother Krista was now properly attached to

her but that had taken a while. Krista had experienced some admissions in mental health institutions. At the time of interviewing she had day treatment and stayed alternately at home and in the institution. With some siblings is sporadic contact, with others more frequent.

Based on these narratives we might conclude that Krista's life became calmer once she was placed in her foster family. However, exact reconstruction of the chronology of moves, caregiver changes, and other disturbances was impossible as Krista's foster mother had to rely on official reports and conversations with others about Krista's past. Evidently, the current incarceration of the mother had not affected the caregiving situation because Krista was no longer living with her mother at the time of incarceration. The story of Ron, as expressed by his mother, summarizes the caregiving arrangements of children living with family well:

Ron was ten years old. When he was one year old, he moved in with his father, who took care of him until he reached seven. Then he lived with his mother until he was nine years old. Since then, his father had taken care of him again. Ron lived with his father and his father's girlfriend and was supervised by Youth Care. He was already living with his father when his mother was incarcerated. At the time of interviewing, his mother had been incarcerated for more than a year. Since then, there had been no more changes in residence or primary caregiver. However, Ron changed residence more than 10 times and also had to change school (although the exact number of school changes is not clear). Ron had one older brother and one younger sister, but they hardly saw each other. For the most part of his life, he did not live with them. All three children had different fathers. He did visit his mother in prison.

4.5 Discussion

This study examined the association between maternal incarceration and the children's caregiving instability with a mixed quantitative/qualitative approach. Three findings stood out. First, the lives of most children of incarcerated mothers were characterized by instability. On average they faced a new primary caregiver every three years and changed residence every two years, the latter is six times the national average. Second, these changes were not limited to the period after the start of the mother's incarceration but also applied to the period before the incarceration. However, the incarceration did ignite a cascade of changes in primary caregivers, even excluding the change brought about by the incarceration itself.

Third, with regard to the nature and context of caregiving instability, different subgroups of children could be distinguished. This provided a more sophisticated understanding of these children's lives. For half of the children who lived with their mother prior to her incarceration, caregiving instability increased strongly after the mother's incarceration. Apparently, these children were most burdened and put at highest (increased) risk by the incarceration of their mother. For the majority of them the incarceration was a clear turning point from a relatively stable to an unstable caregiving situation. The others already experienced instability in their lives but this increased even further since the start of the incarceration. Forty percent of the children who lived with their mother until she became incarcerated, experienced little to no changes and we might conclude that their lives appeared quite settled. Some of these children's caregiving arrangements were characterized by the fact that their father was a stable caregiver, both before and at the start of the mother's incarceration. Other children experienced only one change in primary caregiver and these caregivers often played an important role in the children's lives prior to their mother's incarceration. For a few children (10% of the children who lived with their mother until the incarceration), their lives had become more stable since the start of the incarceration. For these children, the apparent quantitative stability before incarceration turned out on qualitative inspection to mask unstable homes with (non)family members moving in and out or mothers and children living an almost nomadic existence. Finally, children who were already living apart from their mother before her incarceration had the most problematic lives in terms of caregiving instability. These children experienced significantly more disturbances in their caregiving situation than the children who lived with their mother until she became incarcerated. The caregiving situation seemed to become more stable over time. Without doubt, it was not the current incarceration of the mother that brought about changes in instability because their mother had already stopped being a primary caregiver before she was incarcerated.

Overall, while noting that some children had led fairly irregular lives prior to their mother's incarceration, the incarceration provided little prospect for improved stability in the children's lives. For most children, their mothers' incarceration was the start of a life phase with more instability in terms of caregivers and living surroundings. Although we cannot be sure that the incarceration *caused* the instability, this study showed a link between maternal incarceration and children's caregiving instability. Since the start of the incarceration, almost every caregiver change came with a residential move. As such, these children were burdened with a 'double whammy' in the sense that each caregiver disruption also implied a disruption of their living environment. Thus, many of these children not only had to get used to a new caregiver frequently – adjusting to new rules and a new parenting style – but

may also have had to simultaneously change school, sports clubs, or friends (Tasca et al., 2011) because residential changes can affect multiple spheres of functioning, such as activities and routines (Adam et al., 2002).

This study adds to existing knowledge about children of incarcerated mothers in several ways. First, studies that use time-ordered data to examine caregiving instability prior to and starting from the parental incarceration are limited. Tasca and her colleagues (2011) investigated caregiving instability before and starting from the parent's incarceration, but they did so in a group of children for whom negative outcomes had already become manifest in the sense that they had all become delinquent. This study, on the other hand, investigated a more representative sample of children of incarcerated mothers, some doing quite well and reporting no behavioral problems (see Hissel et al., 2011).

Second, some studies in the US examined caregiving instability *since* (but not *before*) the incarceration (Geller et al., 2009; Philips et al., 2006). They found that caregiving instability often followed parental incarceration. The consistency of the findings in the current study with this literature is remarkable given the different penal climate and social setting of the two countries. One explanation for this may be that it is not the length of the prison sentence per se but the uprooting that sets in motion a cascade of instability for the children. In fact, within this study, the findings for the entire sample differed little from the results for the group of children with mothers with relatively long prison sentences. Our findings are also consistent with studies that showed that the involvement of the current caregiver prior to the mother's incarceration might mitigate the negative effects of the incarceration (Hanlon et al., 2005a; Hanlon et al., 2007). Because this mainly applies to children residing with their grandparents, we emphasize the heterogeneity in caregiving arrangements of incarcerated mothers. Most probably there are differences in prior caregiver involvement between different types of caregivers.

Third, this study showed that the lives of siblings sometimes differed with regard to the development of caregiving instability. This contributes to existing knowledge on children of incarcerated mothers as it cautiously suggests that the point of time in their lives at which the incarceration took place might be of relevance. This adds to the consideration of Murray, and his colleagues (2012b) that the parental incarceration should be treated as a life event. However, longitudinal research needs to be conducted to provide more clarity.

Fourth, some previous research measured family and residential instability by considering whether children were living with their parents and the number of residential moves of the parents (Geller et al., 2009). Our study suggests that this approach might under-estimate caregiving instability because some children experienced frequent caregiving disturbances even when living with their mother.

Despite these contributions, our study has a number of limitations. Because our sample was limited to a moderate number of participants, the generalizability of the findings will need to be tested on a larger sample. Incarcerated mothers were recruited from the entire population of incarcerated women in the Netherlands because the researchers were able to survey all prisons. However, the issue of selection bias cannot be ruled out. Some mothers chose not to participate in the study because, as they told us, they had little confidence in institutions such as Youth Care. On the one hand, it is conceivable that mothers of children living in instable caregiving arrangements might not want to participate in our study -or even refrained from informing the penitentiary center that they had children- in order to avoid the risk of the institution reporting to Youth Care. On the other hand, mothers whose families were better off might have also chosen not to participate because they might prefer to arrange for the care of their children within their own network. It is possible that they were fearful that participation might result in unwanted Youth Care involvement. Respondents might have had the tendency to give socially desirable responses and thus under-report caregiving instability. As such, it is possible that these children are even worse off than our findings suggest. Finally, this study does not attempt to control for other disturbances in the caregiving situation but represents a starting point for future research.

Children of incarcerated mothers appear to be a group that needs the attention of professionals and policy makers. These children constitute, given their caregiving history, a vulnerable group for whom the incarceration may be the start of a phase of accumulation of instability and further risk. Creating opportunity so that incarcerated mothers can stay involved with the caregiving of their children seems warranted in this instable period in children's lives. During imprisonment, mothers could be supported and trained in their parenting and particularly their coparenting skills (Cecil, McHale, Strozier, & Pietsch, 2008; Menting, 2012). Policy makers and prison staff and management could facilitate this process by providing additional contact opportunities, such as mother-child visiting days which are already organized in Dutch prisons, and by organizing parent training for mothers being released from prison.

Further research is needed in three areas. First, we studied only one risk domain, that of caregiving instability. As the literature attests, children of incarcerated mothers and fathers are also exposed to other risk factors that may contribute to their negative outcomes, such as abuse or violence between caregivers. It became clear from some of the case studies in the current study that children experienced other problematic life events (e.g. domestic violence or parental drug abuse), despite the fact that there were no changes in the caregiving situation. Ideally, future research should examine the simultaneous occurrence of other risk factors and confounding

life events besides the maternal incarceration and caregiver and residential instability. Second, although such studies could establish the extent to which children of incarcerated parents are exposed to these risk factors both before and after the start of incarceration, other studies, preferably using comparison groups, are needed to establish to what extent incarceration adds to pre-existing risks. Third, given the developmental perspective that separation from primary caregivers impacts on the children's attachment security, the quality of the relationship between mother and child should be further examined. Because most mothers desired to continue their role as a mother - although a distant one- while imprisoned, this raises the question of how coparenting with the current caregiver should be organized. According to Baker, McHale, Strozier, and Cecil (2010), greater coparenting relationship quality during incarceration is associated with better outcomes in the children. One might argue that through proper coparenting, the caregiving role of the mother can be continued during her incarceration, allowing her to remain or become a stable factor in her children's lives while they face this turbulent period in terms of caregiving instability.

Chapter

5

Coparenting in families with incarcerated mothers

This chapter was submitted as:

Hissel, S.C.E.M., Van der Laan, P.H., Oosterman, M., & Schuengel, C. Coparenting in families with incarcerated mothers. The chapter is under review.

Abstract

Incarcerated mothers are forced to share parenting with other caregivers. The risks for the children of such sharing of responsibilities may be mitigated by positive coparenting relationships between their caregivers. This study examined whether coparenting relationships existed between incarcerated mothers and the children's caregivers and investigated the quality of the mother's coparenting behavior. The effect of incarceration on coparenting was distinguished from other risk factors by comparing children of incarcerated mothers with children of mothers who were serving sentences in community. This study found that incarcerated mothers perceived limited possibilities to coparent. For children who resided with their (step) fathers, the situation was the least favorable. A positive association was found between the extent to which coparenting relationships existed and the quality of the incarcerated mother's coparenting behavior. Incarcerated mothers reported lower quality of coparenting behavior than mothers with a community service sentence.

5.1 Introduction

The majority of incarcerated women are mothers of minor children (Engstrom, 2008; Greenfeld & Snell, 2000). A burgeoning literature shows that these children suffer severe problem behavior and have considerably decreased well-being (e.g., Arditti, 2012, and Poehlmann, 2005b, for the US; Murray & Farrington, 2005, 2008b, for the UK; Hissel, Bijleveld, & Kruttschnitt, 2011 for the Netherlands) but the mechanisms that might explain these outcomes are not yet identified (Murray, Farrington, Sekol, & Olsen, 2009; Wakefield, & Uggen (2010). Wildeman, Wakefield, & Turney, 2013).

Most incarcerated mothers were the primary caregivers of their children before imprisonment (Celinska & Siegel, 2010; Glaze & Maruschak, 2009; Loper, Carlson, Levitt, & Scheffel, 2009). Imprisonment of mothers usually requires that other people step into the primary caregiver role and take over many of the parenting roles and duties. This change not only requires adaptation on the part of the children (e.g., Dalley, 2002), but also on the part of the mothers (Eddy & Poehlmann, 2010). They may need to redefine their role as a parent and learn how to share the responsibility over raising their children with others. The risks for the children of such sharing of responsibilities may be mitigated by positive relationships between the caregivers (Cecil, McHale, Strozier, & Pietsch, 2008).

Originating from the context of family relationships, coparenting has been introduced as an important dimension of the experience of children raised by multiple caregivers (Cecil et al., 2008). Coparenting refers to how caregivers collaborate in raising the children for whom they have responsibility and involves (ideally) mutual support of the caregivers and commitment to parenting the child (Karreman, 2006; McHale, Lauretti, Talbot, & Pouquette, 2002; McHale & Lindahl, 2011). Studies on incarcerated mothers and children have found support for the importance of the quality of coparenting on children's adjustment (Cecil et al., 2008). This study, conducted in the Netherlands, examined coparenting between incarcerated mothers and different types of caregivers; it investigated whether imprisonment is associated with the possibilities to coparent and the quality of the coparenting behavior.

Coparenting theory and research, that has its roots in Minuchin's (1974) structural family theory (McHale & Lindahl, 2011), is a rapidly developing field of study. Put succinctly, instead of a rather narrow focus on parent-child or parent-parent dyads, the coparenting concept focuses on the triadic family system of caregivers and the child (Karreman, 2006; McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, Rao, 2004). Coparenting varies among dimensions of cooperation and antagonism. The theoretical concept of coparenting is thus obviously different from how the term is used in a practical context, referring to parental arrangements that, for example, divorced parents made about dividing costs, daily care and upbringing of their children.

Accumulating evidence suggests that the quality of the coparenting relationship contributes to children's developmental outcomes (Karreman, Van Tuijl, Van Aken & Dekovic, 2008; McHale, 1997; McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, Lauretti, & Rasmussen, 2000). However, studies that showed that differences in coparenting relationships were associated with children's developmental outcomes (Karreman et al., 2008; McHale, 1997; McHale et al., 2000), were generally carried out with married middle-class couples (Baker, McHale, Strozier, & Cecil, 2010; McHale, Waller, & Pearson, 2012). Coparenting in middle-class families may not be directly comparable to coparenting between incarcerated mothers and children's alternative caregivers. First, incarcerated mothers are physically barred from contact with their children (Poehlmann, 2010) and have limited opportunities to cooperate in parenting (Strozier Armstrong, Skuza, Cecil, & McHale, 2011). There are only few women's prisons, often resulting in long travel distances, which complicates frequent visiting (Robertson, 2012). Thus, the mothers' contacts with their children and the co-parents of their children may be highly irregular. Also, visiting in the impersonal prison setting has been mentioned as emotionally charged (Hissel et al., 2011). These difficulties might impede the formation of a qualitatively good coparenting relationship (Loper, Phillips, Nichols, & Dallaire, 2014). Second, children of incarcerated mothers live in a variety of caregiving arrangements with many different types of caregivers, such as father, various types of relatives and friends, and foster care (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Hissel et al., 2011). Therefore, unlike nuclear families, the co-parent is not always the biological parent of the child nor do mothers always have affective and familial ties with the children's caregiver. Third, these children have been found to change caregiver frequently during their mothers' imprisonment (Tasca, Rodriguez, & Zatz, 2011). Thus, the children experience constantly changing co-parents, which is obviously different from children of married couples.

Only few studies examined coparenting in the specific group of families of incarcerated (or recently released) mothers (Baker et al., 2010; Loper & Novero-Clarke, 2013; Loper et al., 2014; McHale, Salman, Strozier, & Cecil, 2013; Strozier et al., 2011). These studies revealed that coparenting does occur in the context of maternal incarceration. Strozier and her colleagues (2011) found coparenting relationships of different quality: positive coparenting relationships included solidarity between the mothers and grandmothers expressed in shared problem-solving, cooperation and good communication. Negative dynamics in coparenting relationships included, for example, disagreements about discipline and the mothers' physical and emotional absence as a co-parent. Baker, McHale, Strozier, and Cecil (2010) and McHale, Salman, Strozier, and Cecil (2013) also revealed that the quality of coparenting relationships between the mothers and grandmothers was associated with children's problem behavior, although findings were inconclusive with regard

to externalizing problems. Baker and his colleagues (2010) demonstrated that higher coparenting relationship quality during incarceration was associated with fewer externalizing behavior problems in the children, although McHale and his colleagues (2013) did not find this association in a subsample of these families following the mothers' release. Internalizing problem behavior of the children was associated with more disengagement and less shared focus during triadic interaction (McHale et al., 2013). According to Loper and her colleagues (2014), the quality of the parents' coparenting behavior was positively associated with children's mood.

Additional coparenting research in families of incarcerated mothers is necessary for three reasons. First, the existing research was mainly limited to families where children resided with maternal grandmothers. The samples of Baker and his colleagues (2010), McHale and his colleagues (2013), and Strozier and her colleagues (2011), existed of coparental dyads of incarcerated mothers and maternal grandmothers who were already involved in coparenting the children before the mothers' incarceration. For these families it was evident that coparenting relationships existed between the mothers and the grandmothers. Although Loper and her colleagues (2014) included different types of caregivers in their study on coparenting between incarcerated parents and the children's caregivers, 80% of children of incarcerated mothers in their sample lived with a grandparent. Coparenting might work differently for other mother-caregiver dyads than for mother-grandmother dyads because of the pre-existing affective and familial ties between the mothers, the grandmothers, and the children (McHale et al., 2013). Loper and her colleagues (2014) found that children's placement with maternal grandmothers was associated with the mothers perceiving a more cooperative coparenting relationship than children who were placed with alternate caregivers. However, the nature of these alternate caregivers was not further specified. While in the US, the only country where coparenting in families of incarcerated mothers has been studied so far, living with a grandmother is the most common caregiving arrangement for children of incarcerated mothers (reported by 42% of mothers in state prison), the majority of mothers (58%) reported other caregiving arrangements for their children: 37% reported the father, 23% reported other relatives and 11% reported a foster home, agency or institution⁸ (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008). This variety in caregivers is consistent with the caregiving situation of children of incarcerated mothers in the Netherlands (Hissel et al., 2011). By only focusing on mother-grandmother coparenting relationships, the existing literature thus disregards the majority of affected children.

⁸ Percentages sum to more than 100% because some incarcerated mothers had multiple children living with multiple caregivers

The second reason for additional research is linked to the fact that previous studies not specifically looked at those coparenting situations where mothers are alone with their children. According to McHale (1997), coparenting can take place in two domains: coparenting behavior when the mother is together with the caregiver and the child, known as *overt* coparenting, or direct conversation with the child about the other caregiver or the family unit in the absence of the other caregiver (for example positive or negative statements about the other caregiver and the family unit), referred to as *covert* coparenting. Coparenting in the covert domain might be of great significance for families with incarcerated mothers, as they do not have as regular overt coparenting possibilities as nuclear families.

The third reason is that previous research did not include a comparison group. Therefore, it is unknown whether any coparenting patterns observed are attributable to the maternal incarceration. In general, families of incarcerated mothers experience severe life circumstances including for example parental substance abuse and low socioeconomic status (Siegel, 2011), which might complicate coparenting. In order to identify whether incarcerated mothers are deprived in their opportunity to engage in coparenting relationships and in the quality of their coparenting behavior, a suitable comparison group should be included, such as criminally active mothers who are not incarcerated.

5.2 Current study

In the first part of the study it was examined to what extent coparenting relationships existed between incarcerated mothers and the caregivers of the children. Given that incarcerated mothers are physically separated from the co-parents and the children, it was hypothesized that incarcerated mothers had less opportunity to engage in coparenting relationships than criminally active mothers who were not incarcerated. Furthermore, it was examined whether the extent to which coparenting relationships existed was associated with different type of caregivers. For those families of incarcerated mothers where coparenting relationships existed, the type of coparenting behavior of the incarcerated mothers was assessed.

The second part of the study considered the quality of the coparenting behavior. It was examined whether the quality of this behavior depended on the extent to which a complete coparenting relationship exists. Furthermore, it was examined whether the quality of the mothers' coparenting behavior was associated with different types of caregivers. Because existing literature converges on the conclusion that mother-grandmother coparenting relationships were often already established before the incarceration, it was hypothesized that the incarcerated mothers' coparenting behavior

was of higher quality for those children who resided with grandparents than for children who resided with other types of caregivers. Finally, it was hypothesized that for families where coparenting relationships existed, the incarceration is negatively associated with the quality of the mothers' coparenting behavior.

5.3 Method

Sample

Study group

For $N = 105$ children, information was obtained about the existence and quality of the coparenting relationship of the incarcerated mothers with the other caregivers. The children had 67 different mothers and 82 different other caregivers. A total of 30 children (29%) lived with father, 34 children (32%) lived with grandparents, 26 children (25%) lived in kinship care and 15 children (14%) lived in foster care (which was defined as living with professional foster parents or in institutions).

Comparison group

For $N = 50$ children of convicted mothers serving community sentences, information was obtained about the existence and quality of the coparenting relationship their mothers had with the other caregiver. The children had 27 different mothers. Nearly all children ($N = 45$, 90%) had a second caregiver in addition to their mother, most often a (step) father and for some of them the grandparents.

Table 5.1 provides an overview of the different types of caregivers for the children in the study group and in the comparison group. It also presents descriptive statistics of mother- and child characteristics of both groups. The children of incarcerated mothers did not differ significantly from children of mothers with a community service sentence on age ($t(153) = .97$, $p = .34$) and gender ($\chi^2 = .25$, $df = 1$, $p = .62$). The incarcerated mothers did not differ significantly from mothers with a community service sentence on age ($t(85) = -1.27$, $p = .21$), country of birth ($\chi^2 = .43$, $df = 1$, $p = .51$) and number of living children ($t(92) = -1.98$, $p = .05$).

Table 5.1. *Characteristics study group and comparison group*

| | Children of Incarcerated Mothers | Children of Mothers with a Community Service Sentence |
|---|--|---|
| Type of co-parent % | | |
| Father | 29 | 82 |
| Grandparents | 32 | 8 |
| Other family (e.g., aunt, older sister) | 21 | 0 |
| Kinship care otherwise (e.g., friends, nanny) | 4 | 0 |
| Foster family | 12 | 0 |
| Residential foster care | 2 | 0 |
| No second caregiver | 0 | 10 |
| Child's Age (in years) at time of interview | | |
| Mean (<i>SD</i>) | 9.30 (5.08) | 8.46 (4.92) |
| Range (min-max) | 0-21 | 1-18 |
| Child's sex | | |
| Male % | 54 | 50 |
| Mother's Number of living children | | |
| Mean (<i>SD</i>) | 2.16 (1.38) | 2.85 (1.83) |
| Range (min-max) | 1-7 | 1-8 |
| Mother's Country of birth | | |
| Netherlands % | 58 | 44 |
| Missing | 3 | 15 |
| Mother's Age (in years) at time of interview | | |
| Mean (<i>SD</i>) | 35.65 (8.19) | 38.11 (6.75) |
| Range (min-max) | 23-52 | 26-48 |
| Missing % | 3 | 19 |

Procedure

Study group

Recruitment took place between 2011 and 2012. Through the prison staff imprisoned mothers with underage children were invited to attend an introductory meeting where researchers asked them to participate in the research. The sample included children of mothers from the regular units and units with minimum security of all five women's prisons in the Netherlands. Psychiatric wards were excluded, because of the vulnerability of women residing there. Mothers who agreed to participate signed informed consent. The Coparenting Scale was administered by a trained interviewer. A setting was provided where the respondents could speak confidentially.

Comparison group

Study recruitment took place between 2011 and 2012. Supervisors from the community service unit informed mothers with underage children about the

research and the mothers were asked to participate in the research. Children for whom mother had been incarcerated since their birth were excluded. After informed consent was signed the Coparenting Scale was administered by a trained interviewer. A setting was provided where the respondents could speak confidentially.

Respondents of the study- and comparison group were given a participant fee with a value of 10 euros. Permission for the study was obtained from the Netherlands Department of Correctional Services (DJI) and the Probation Service of the Netherlands. The data collection protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of VU University.

Measures

The revised Coparenting Scale is a 16-item questionnaire assessing the parenting role that mothers share with the current caregiver of the children (Karreman et al., 2008; McHale, 1997; McHale et al., 2000). This scale measures coparenting in the two domains: coparenting behavior when mother is together with the caregiver and the child (known as *overt* coparenting) and coparenting behavior when mother is alone with the child (known as *covert* coparenting). The scale contains seven items about family integrity (e.g., how often, when all three of you are together, do you say something nice about the other caregiver to your child?), three items about disparagement (e.g., how often, when alone with the child, do you make a comment about the absent caregiver that might create a somewhat negative feeling in your child?), two items about conflict (e.g., how often do you find yourself in a disagreement with the other caregiver about your child, in the presence of your child?) and three items about reprimand (e.g., how often, when all three of you are together, are you the first one to step in and handle things when your child is acting up or disobeying the rules?).

The translated version from Karreman and her colleagues (2008) of the revised Coparenting Scale (McHale, 1997; McHale et al., 2000) was modified in order to adapt the questionnaire to the caregiving situation of families with incarcerated mothers. Revisions that were made consisted of replacing “partner” with “other caregiver” because the co-parent was not necessarily the mother’s partner and simplifying difficult language (e.g., replacing “say something affectionate or pleasant” with “say something nice”) in order to make the questionnaire more easily understandable for a broader range of respondents with varying vocabulary levels. The time span the questionnaire covered was extended from 2 weeks to 3 months as most incarcerated mothers, caregivers and children did not see each other as regularly as non-incarcerated co-parents for whom the original coparenting scale was intended. The revisions and the extended time period were also maintained in

the questionnaire for the comparison group. Mothers in the comparison group were asked to answer the coparenting questions with regard to the father, unless the father was not at all involved in the caregiving of the child.

Mothers were asked to rate each of the behaviors described in the items on a 7-point Likert Scale, ranging from 1 (absolutely never) to 7 (almost constantly). It was a priori considered that a response category “not applicable” should be added, because it was of specific interest what types of coparenting behavior are or are not applicable to families with incarcerated mothers, such as coparenting behavior when alone with the child or when together with both child and caregiver. For the families of 19 children, incarcerated mothers, caregivers and children never had any opportunity for face-to-face contact, mostly because of practical reasons, but did have telephone contact. For these families the completion of the Coparenting Scale was based on telephone calls.

Analyses

Skewness and kurtosis tests indicated distributions that deviated from normal distributions. Therefore, non-parametric tests were used in the analyses.

To what extent coparenting relationships existed in the families of the children was determined by examining the non-application of the questions of the Coparenting Scale. A nominal variable “Type of Coparenting” was created to represent the extent of coparenting relationships (0 = no coparenting relationship, 1 = overt coparenting relationship, 2 = covert coparenting relationship, 3 = complete coparenting relationship) and simple frequency analyses were used. The differences between children of incarcerated mothers and children of mothers serving a community sentence (0 = study group, 1 = comparison group) in the extent of coparenting relationships was tested with Mann-Whitney U. Differences in the extent of coparenting relationships for the different types of caregivers (1 = father, 2 = grandparents, 3 = kinship caregivers, 4 = foster caregivers) were tested using a Fisher-Freeman-Halton test. For the latter two tests a compressed nominal variable ‘Type of Coparenting Strict’ was used: 0 = no coparenting, 1 = partial coparenting (overt or covert), 2 = complete coparenting. For the assessment of the coparenting behavior of the incarcerated mothers, simple frequency analyses were used for the 16 items of the Coparenting Scale. The given explanations as to why questions were not applicable are anecdotal.

For measuring coparenting quality, only those items of the Coparenting Scale that were filled in by mothers of at least 80% of the children were included in the analyses. With content analyses coparenting constructs were identified that were applicable to families of incarcerated mothers: ‘speaking positively about the co-

parent' and 'acknowledging the family unit'. The quality of the mother's coparenting behavior on these constructs was measured by averaging the item scores.

Mann-Whitney U tests were used to test differences in coparenting quality between families of incarcerated mothers with complete coparenting relationships and partial (overt or covert) coparenting relationships (0 = partial, 1 = complete). Differences in coparenting quality between the caregiver conditions were tested with Kruskal Wallis. Post hoc analyses using Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted to compare the quality of the mother's coparenting behavior with regard to grandparents with the quality of the mother's coparenting behavior with regard to the other types of caregivers. In order to avoid inflated alphas due to a multiple comparisons problem, bonferroni correction was applied. The α was reduced to $\alpha/k = 0.02$. The differences between children of incarcerated mothers and children of mothers serving a community sentence in the quality of the mothers' coparenting behavior were also tested with Mann-Whitney U tests.

5.4 Results

Existence of coparenting relationships

For a quarter of the children ($N = 27$, 26%), the incarcerated mothers did not perceive any characteristic of a coparenting relationship with the current caregiver, positive nor negative. For children whose convicted mothers were not incarcerated, this applied to only one in ten ($N = 5$, 10%). For another quarter of the children ($N = 29$, 28%), incarcerated mothers could answer questions about coparenting behavior within the family triad and when alone with the child. Thus, for children in these families, mothers perceived the entire range (overt and covert) of coparenting behavior in themselves, resulting in a complete coparenting relationship. For the children of non-incarcerated mothers this applied to almost three quarters ($N = 37$, 74%).

For the remaining children only partial coparenting relationships were distinguished. In the families of $N = 46$ children (44%), incarcerated mothers could only answer questions about coparenting behavior when alone with the child. Questions about coparenting behavior when in the presence of both child and caregiver were not applicable. Thus, in these families only covert coparenting relationships were perceived. In contrast, this only applied to 16% ($N = 8$) of children of non-incarcerated mothers. In the families of $N = 3$ children (3%), mothers could answer questions about coparenting behavior when in the presence of both caregiver and child. Questions about coparenting behavior when alone with the child were

not applicable. Thus, in these three families overt coparenting relationships were perceived. Coparenting behavior that was restricted to overt coparenting situations, were not perceived by the non-incarcerated mothers.

In sum, for almost three quarters of the children, the incarcerated mothers did not perceive the entire range of usual coparenting behaviors. Incarcerated mothers had significantly less coparenting opportunities than mothers with a community service sentence ($z = -4.95, p = .00$). See Table 5.2 for an overview.

Table 5.2. *The existence of coparenting relationships in families of children of incarcerated mothers and children of mothers with a community service sentence*

| | Percentage Children Incarcerated Mothers | Percentage Children of Mothers with a Community Service Sentence |
|---|---|--|
| Complete coparenting relationship | 28 (-2.3) | 74 (3.4) |
| Overt or covert coparenting relationship | 47 (1.7) | 16 (-2.4) |
| No coparenting relationship | 26 (1.1) | 10 (-1.7) |
| Total | 100 | 100 |

Note. Significantly deviant standardized residuals ($> |1.96|$) appear bold in parentheses below group percentages

Association between types of caregivers and the existence of coparenting relationships

For children of incarcerated mothers who resided with their (step) fathers ($N = 30, 29\%$), the mothers did not perceive any coparenting relationship for half of them. For not even a quarter of the children the mothers perceived a complete coparenting relationship with the (step) father.

In contrast, for children residing with their grandparents ($N = 34, 32\%$), the mothers perceived any form of coparenting for almost nine in ten children. However, just as for children residing with their fathers, a complete coparenting relationship was only perceived for roughly one in four children.

For children residing with other kinship caregivers than fathers or grandparents ($N = 26, 25\%$), for almost a quarter the mothers did not perceive any form of coparenting. But for more than a third a complete coparenting relationship was perceived.

For children in foster care ($N = 15, 14\%$) the pattern was very similar to that of children residing with grandparents. Their mothers did not perceive any form of

coparenting for a minority and for almost nine in ten children the mothers perceived at least partial coparenting.

When comparing these different types of caregivers of children of incarcerated mothers, overall a significant difference was found with regard to the extent to which mothers perceived a coparenting relationship ($p = .02$, Fisher-Freeman-Halton test). See Table 5.3 for an overview.

Table 5.3. *Differences in the extent of coparenting relationship between types of caregivers*

| | Father | Grandparents | Kinship caregivers | Foster caregivers |
|--|--------------------|--------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Complete coparenting | 23 (-.4) | 27 (-.1) | 35 (1.8) | 27 (-.1) |
| Partial coparenting (overt or covert) | 27 (-1.6) | 62 (1.3) | 42 (-1.1) | 60 (2.0) |
| No coparenting | 50 (2.6) | 12 (-1.6) | 23 (-.7) | 13 (-1.9) |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Note. Significantly deviant standardized residuals ($> |1.96|$) appear bold in parentheses below group percentages

Exhibited type of coparenting behavior by incarcerated mothers

Even in those families where coparenting relationships existed (in the families of $N = 78$ children), incarceration limited the opportunity to exhibit coparenting behavior: only five of the 16 questions about usual coparenting behaviors could be answered by the mothers of a substantial part (at least 80%) of the children. These five questions were all about coparenting behavior when the mother was together with the child but not with the other caregiver (covert coparenting, for example: how often, when alone with the child, do you say something that brings the absent caregiver into your conversation in a positive way?). Two reasons were distinguished for not recognizing the type of coparenting behaviors that the other 11 questions described. First, in a considerable number of families the questioned coparenting *situation* did not occur. For example many mothers ($N = 46$, 59%) did not have the opportunity to be in the presence of the caregiver and child at the same time (overt coparenting situation). Secondly, the questioned coparenting *behavior* did not occur, as it was not possible given the mother's imprisonment status. For example, the question about how often the mother was the first one to step in and handle things when the child was acting up or disobeying the rules was not applicable as many mothers explained that the child did not have the opportunity to disobey during strict and rule-driven prison visits. The coparenting behavior in question was therefore not applicable. See Table 5.4.

Table 5.4. *Opportunities for children of incarcerated mothers to be exposed to coparenting behavior*

| Construct | Question | <i>N</i> Children Question applicable | % Children Question applicable |
|------------------|---|---|--------------------------------------|
| Family Integrity | Physical affection to child in family triad | 31 | 40 |
| | Physical affection to partner in family triad | 32 | 41 |
| | Verbal affirmation of child in family triad | 32 | 41 |
| | Verbal affirmation of partner in family triad | 32 | 41 |
| | Inviting partner to join in in family triad | 24 | 31 |
| | Invoking the absent parent when alone with child | 70 | 90 |
| | Affirming the absent parent when alone with child | 70 | 90 |
| Disparagement | Creating negative feeling about absent parent when alone with child | 74 | 95 |
| | Criticizing absent partner when alone with child | 72 | 92 |
| | Undoing partner's discipline in family triad | 23 | 30 |
| Conflict | Tense interchange with partner in family triad | 28 | 36 |
| | Arguing with partner in family triad | 28 | 36 |
| Reprimand | Disciplining the child in family triad | 24 | 31 |
| | Asking partner to discipline in family triad | 27 | 35 |
| | Taking back seat in discipline in family triad | 28 | 36 |
| | Invoking the family unit when alone with child | 67 | 86 |

For measuring coparenting quality, coparenting behavior was taken into consideration when incarcerated mothers of at least 80% of the children exhibited the behavior. Two of the questions, “invoking the absent parent” and “affirming the absent parent”, are part of the construct “family integrity” and were strongly correlated (alpha reliability of .73). These two questions represented the extent to which mother spoke positively about the co-parent. A third question, “invoking the family unit”, represented coparenting behavior that can be described as “acknowledging that coparenting exists”. The following analyses therefore relied on these two substantively identified coparenting constructs “speaking positively about the co-parent” and “acknowledging the family unit”.

Association between quality of coparenting behavior and perceived coparenting relationship

In those families where incarcerated mothers perceived complete coparenting relationships, the mothers' coparenting behavior was of higher quality than in those

families where mothers only perceived partial coparenting relationships (overt or covert). For the coparenting construct “speaking positively”, this difference in quality was significant ($z = -2.13, p = .03$) and for the coparenting construct “acknowledging the family unit”, this difference was only marginally significant ($z = -1.83, p = .07$).

Association between quality of coparenting behavior and type of caregiver

The quality of the incarcerated mothers’ coparenting behavior also depended on which type of caregiver cared for their children as demonstrated by the following findings. When comparing the four types of caregivers, significant effects for the quality of speaking positively ($\chi^2(3,73) = 11.18, p = .01$) and for acknowledging the family unit ($\chi^2(3,67) = 13.70, p = .00$) were found. Post hoc analyses indicated that the average quality of acknowledging the family unit was significantly higher for grandparents than for foster caregivers ($z = -2.73, p = .01$). However, there were no significant differences on the average quality of acknowledging the family unit when comparing grandparents with fathers and with network caregivers ($z = -2.12, p = .03$ and $z = -.65, p = .52$, respectively). Also, there were no significant differences on the average quality of speaking positively when comparing grandparents with any of the other types of caregivers ($z = -2.18, p = .03$ for fathers; $z = -2.33, p = .02$ for foster caregivers; and $z = -.15, p = .88$ for network caregivers, respectively).

Association between quality of coparenting behavior and maternal incarceration

Incarcerated mothers showed a lower quality of coparenting behavior than mothers with a community service sentence on the coparenting construct “acknowledging the family unit” ($z = -3.63, p < .00$) and on the construct “speaking positively” ($z = -2.22, p = .03$).

5.5 Discussion

The nature of the coparenting relationship between caregivers who are responsible for the upbringing of a child plays a critical role in the children’s well-being (McHale & Lindahl, 2011, McHale et al., 2013). However, this study revealed that coparenting in families of incarcerated mothers was no matter of course. The incarcerated mothers were deprived in their opportunity to engage in coparenting relationships and reported lower quality of coparenting behavior when compared to mothers who were involved in the criminal justice system but who were not incarcerated. An important proportion of the children of incarcerated mothers was not exposed to coparenting:

for one in four children it turned out that no coparenting relationship existed between their incarcerated mother and their current caregiver. This shortcoming depended on which caregiver cared for the children. The situation of children who stayed with their (step) father was the least favorable: for 50% of these children, no coparenting relationship existed between their incarcerated mother and their (step) father. Possibly, the mothers and fathers were already separated. Indeed, it is known that many incarcerated mothers were the sole caregivers of their children before the incarceration. In general, it is known that a cooperative coparenting relationship between separated parents is relatively uncommon (McGene & King, 2012). However, it is unknown for what proportion of the separated parents a coparenting relationship (positive or negative) exists at all.

In those families where coparenting relationships existed, the major proportion of the children was restricted to allusions of the mothers about the other caregiver and did not experience situations in which they were in the presence of both their caregivers. The extent to which coparenting relationships are perceived by the incarcerated mother is of relevance: in families where complete coparenting relationships were perceived, incarcerated mothers exhibited qualitatively higher coparenting behavior than in families where only partial coparenting relationships were perceived. The quality of the mothers' coparenting behavior was also dependent on which caregiver cared for the children. For the children residing with the grandparents, mothers acknowledged the family unit the most.

This study builds on existing studies that successfully demonstrated the importance of the coparenting construct in families where children resided with their grandmother (Baker et al., 2010; Loper & Novero-Clarke, 2013; Loper et al., 2014; McHale et al., 2013; Strozier et al., 2011). However, it could be questioned whether the positive coparenting relationships between incarcerated mothers and grandmothers, as revealed by these studies, would also be found when examining the mothers' coparenting relationship with other types of caregivers. The reason for this is that most grandmothers were already involved in coparenting the child prior to the mothers' incarceration (McHale et al., 2013). This study explored coparenting in families where children of incarcerated mothers stayed with a diverse range of caregivers. Indeed, a less positive picture was sketched with regard to the mothers' opportunity to engage in coparenting relationships and the related quality of their coparenting behavior. This could be an important concern because the existing studies have shown that the quality of coparenting behavior is related to problem behavior in the children of incarcerated mothers.

Findings should be interpreted with caution, as this is a first exploration within a caregiving context that is different from previous research and with an instrument that was not used in the population of families with incarcerated mothers before.

However, this is the first study that included a comparison group, and by including this group, the coparenting findings could be put in perspective of the multiple other risk factors that also challenge coparenting. In sum, findings indicate that coparenting possibilities and quality were certainly deprived when compared to families of criminally involved mothers who were not incarcerated and that it also varied according to which co-parent cared for the children. Whether this is related to child functioning should be further investigated.

A few caveats are in order. First, the sample size is moderate, especially given the heterogeneity found in the coparenting relationships, which meant that different subgroups of relations had to be considered. Replication studies with larger samples will be needed. Second, findings are based on self-reports that run the risk of participants giving socially desirable answers and thus may under-represent the occurrence of negative coparenting behavior (McHale, 1997). Thereby, self-reports of coparenting behavior also suppose a certain level of understanding and awareness of relational processes from the mothers. In other words, mothers might exhibit coparenting behavior but do not interpret it as such. In that case, this study may underestimate the extent to which children were exposed to coparenting. However, the occurrence and quality of coparenting behavior was compared with an appropriate comparison group of mothers of whom we might suppose the same objections would apply.

Findings from this research might be helpful for professionals in the field working with these populations and policy makers. Consideration of the parental role of the mother during imprisonment is increasing. In the Netherlands, for example, child-focused visiting days are organized in prison and volunteers organize transport for children to and from prison. However, the finding that mothers are visited by caregiver and child together to a much lesser extent than by the child alone, indicates that there should also be more focus on the family context, such as family visiting days. Parenting programs are designed to incorporate the incarcerated mothers in the caregiving of their children and to support the mothers in their parenting (Menting, 2012). However, programs seem to focus on individual parenting (Baker et al., 2010) and in previous research the crucial need for family-based intervention programs was identified as a key area of attention (Baker et al., 2010; Engstrom, 2008). This study adds the important note that parenting programs should explicitly pay attention to the impact of the mothers' coparenting behavior when alone with the child.

Future research should target the following considerations. First, empirical knowledge about the impact of the non-existence of coparenting relationships during the imprisonment and after release should be expanded. Second, the results from this study underscore the need of research that builds on the impact of coparenting behavior by parents in the absence of the other caregiver (as already emphasized by McHale, 1997). Third, the impact of coparenting behavior on the children's problem

behavior should be considered in a diverse sample of caregivers. It is an important finding that the usual coparenting behaviors (as studied with the Coparenting Scale) are not applicable to this population. In line with previous studies that interviewed or observed incarcerated mothers and the maternal grandmothers (Baker et al, 2010; Strozier et al., 2011), future research should reveal whether incarcerated mothers, and preferably also the caregivers, exhibit different types of coparenting behavior than studied so far.

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.

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Samenvatting (Dutch summary)

Een studie naar het welbevinden, psychosociaal functioneren en de verzorgingssituatie van kinderen van gedetineerde moeders

Introductie

Een overzicht van onderzoeksliteratuur in dit proefschrift laat zien dat kinderen van gedetineerde ouders kampen met verminderd welbevinden en psychosociale problematiek. Het leeuwendeel van de studies richtte zich op kinderen wier vaders waren gedetineerd. Nog weinig is bekend over welke effecten de detentie van moeder heeft op het functioneren van kinderen. Detentie van moeder zou echter juist nog ernstiger gevolgen kunnen hebben voor de kinderen dan detentie van vader omdat de emotionele en psychosociale betrokkenheid van moeders bij kinderen meestal groter is dan van vaders (Murray & Farrington, 2008).

Het literatuuroverzicht waarop dit proefschrift is gebaseerd, laat zien dat de verzorgingssituatie een belangrijke rol kan spelen in de psychosociale problematiek van kinderen van gedetineerde moeders. Ten eerste laten studies zien dat veel moeders vóór detentie de enige verzorger van hun kinderen waren en kan de scheiding van moeder ten gevolge van detentie dus instabiliteit in de verzorgingssituatie van kinderen veroorzaken. Hoewel empirisch bewijs ontbreekt, veronderstellen studies een relatie tussen instabiliteit in de verzorgingssituatie en problematiek bij kinderen van gedetineerde moeders. Ten tweede resulteert de detentie er waarschijnlijk in dat anderen worden betrokken bij de dagelijkse verzorging van de kinderen. Dit delen van de zorg en opvoeding wordt *coparenting* genoemd. Eerder onderzoek heeft uitgewezen dat er een relatie bestaat tussen de kwaliteit van coparenting interactie en het psychosociaal functioneren van kinderen. Het is echter nog grotendeels onbekend in hoeverre de detentie van moeder verband houdt met de mate en kwaliteit van coparenting interactie.

Het doel van dit proefschrift is het bestuderen van de relatie tussen het welbevinden en het psychosociaal functioneren van kinderen, de detentie van moeder en de verzorgingssituatie. De onderzoeksvragen zijn gebaseerd op een bio-ecologische systeemtheorie (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, 2005) naar aanleiding waarvan wordt verondersteld dat het functioneren van de kinderen niet volledig kan worden verklaard door alleen de detentie van moeder in aanmerking te nemen. Meerdere, op elkaar inwerkende factoren zijn waarschijnlijk van invloed. Het bio-ecologisch systeemmodel is gebruikt als een heuristisch raamwerk om de meest relevante factoren te selecteren voor empirisch onderzoek. Er is gekeken naar leeftijd en sekse van de kinderen, het gescheiden zijn van de gedetineerde moeder, instabiliteit in de verzorgingssituatie en coparenting.

De studie

De studie geeft informatie over het welbevinden, het psychosociaal functioneren en de verzorgingssituatie van kinderen van gedetineerde moeders. Ook is informatie verzameld over coparenting in gezinnen van gedetineerde moeders. Zowel de gedetineerde moeders, de verzorgers van de kinderen als de kinderen zelf gaven informatie. De dataverzameling vond plaats tussen 2008 en 2012 op reguliere en (zeer) beperkt beveiligde afdelingen van alle vrouwengevangenissen in Nederland. Via medewerkers van de penitentiaire inrichtingen werden gedetineerde moeders met kinderen tot en met 18 jaar uitgenodigd voor deelname aan het onderzoek. Moeders die deelnamen werden geïnterviewd en vulden vragenlijsten in over het psychosociaal functioneren van hun kinderen en over coparenting met de verzorger(s) van hun kinderen. Indien ze hiervoor toestemming gaven, werden ook de huidige verzorgers van de kinderen benaderd voor een interview en het invullen van vragenlijsten. Indien zowel de moeder, de verzorger en het kind zelf toestemming gaven, werden ten slotte ook de kinderen geïnterviewd en (indien 11 jaar of ouder) gevraagd vragenlijsten in te vullen. De studie bevat informatie over 255 kinderen (55% jongens, 45% meisjes) van 124 verschillende moeders. Voor 81 kinderen namen ook de verzorgers deel aan het onderzoek. Tweeënzestig kinderen namen zelf deel.

Om beter te begrijpen of problematiek is toe te schrijven aan de detentie van moeder of aan andere risicofactoren, werd daarnaast ook een controlegroep betrokken van kinderen van wie de veroordeelde moeders thuis verbleven. Deze moeders voerden een werkstraf uit. De controlegroep bevat informatie over 55 kinderen, die is verkregen van in totaal 28 verschillende moeders. De moeders vulden vragenlijsten in over het psychosociaal functioneren van hun kinderen en over coparenting met de verzorger(s) van hun kinderen. De dataverzameling vond plaats tussen 2011 en 2012. Via reclasseringsmedewerkers van alle vijf reclasseringsregio's in Nederland werden moeders met kinderen tot en met 18 jaar uitgenodigd voor deelname aan het onderzoek, op voorwaarde dat ze sinds de geboorte van het kind niet gedetineerd waren geweest.

Resultaten

Welbevinden

De studie in hoofdstuk 2 richtte zich op het welbevinden en psychosociaal functioneren van kinderen van gedetineerde moeders, tegen de achtergrond van verschillende verzorgingsarrangementen. De studie liet zien dat er een grote verscheidenheid aan verzorgers van kinderen was, onder wie vaders, verzorgers uit het eigen netwerk (zoals familie en vrienden) en bestandspleegzorg. Een aanzienlijk

deel van de kinderen (40%) woonde al niet meer bij moeder voorafgaand aan de detentie. Dit impliceert dat voor veel kinderen wisselingen in de verzorgingssituatie al vóór de detentie plaatsvonden.

Volgens gedetineerde moeders, verzorgers en kinderen had de detentiesituatie invloed op het functioneren van kinderen op verschillende levensdomeinen, zoals thuis en op school. Ook noemden zij moeilijkheden bij het onderhouden van contact met de gedetineerde moeders als een belangrijke factor in het verminderd welbevinden van de kinderen. Het bezoeken van moeder was bijvoorbeeld vaak lastig te organiseren vanwege logistieke problemen. De gevangenisomgeving maakte op veel kinderen een sterke indruk en sommige kinderen ervoeren het zelfs als intimiderend. Kinderen hadden moeite met het begrijpen van sommige regels tijdens bezoeken, zoals beperkingen aangaande fysiek contact met hun gedetineerde moeder. De studie liet zien dat kinderen kampten met complex en divers probleemgedrag, waaronder internaliserende en externaliserende problematiek. Dit probleemgedrag was sterk verhoogd in vergelijking met een normpopulatie. Bijna alle kinderen vertelden verdriet te hebben vanwege hun moeders' detentie.

Leeftijd en sekse

Leeftijd lijkt onderscheidend in hoe kinderen verdriet ervaren. Jonge kinderen gaven vooral aan hun moeder te missen. Bij oudere kinderen waren de emoties gelaagd: naast verdriet en gemis was er soms ook sprake van boosheid om wat hen was overkomen, angst om gepest te worden, of zorgen om huisvesting of het welbevinden van moeder. Sommige oudere kinderen zagen de tijdelijke afwezigheid van moeder als een mogelijkheid om controle te krijgen op hun eigen leven. De studie in hoofdstuk 3 toonde aan dat leeftijd een belangrijke factor is in het bestuderen van psychosociale problematiek van kinderen. De bevindingen lieten een relatie zien tussen internaliserend en externaliserend probleemgedrag en het ouder zijn van kinderen. Dit verband werd niet alleen gevonden bij kinderen van gedetineerde moeders, maar ook bij kinderen van wie de moeders een werkstraf uitvoerden. Het probleemgedrag van de kinderen kan dus niet (alleen) worden verklaard door een tijdelijke negatieve reactie van het hebben van een strafrechtelijk veroordeelde moeder, maar moet worden gezien binnen een bredere ontwikkelingspedagogische context. De resultaten lieten geen verschillen zien in de gevolgen van detentie op het probleemgedrag van meisjes en jongens. Dit geeft aan dat het geslacht geen rol speelt in het psychosociaal functioneren van kinderen van gedetineerde moeders.

Scheiding van moeder en kind

In de studie in hoofdstuk 3 werd het verband tussen de detentie van moeder en internaliserende, externaliserende en sociale problematiek bij kinderen onderzocht.

De resultaten suggereren dat sociale problemen voor een deel kunnen worden verklaard door detentie van moeder. Internaliserende en externaliserende gedragsproblematiek kunnen worden verklaard door factoren die vaak samen gaan met detentie, maar die ook voorkomen in families van strafrechtelijk veroordeelde moeders die niet in detentie zitten. De bevindingen dragen bij aan de vraag welk effect de detentie van moeder heeft op de psychosociale ontwikkeling van kinderen (Wildeman & Turney, 2014).

Instabiliteit in de verzorgingssituatie

De studie in hoofdstuk 4 richtte zich op de relatie tussen de detentie van moeder en instabiliteit in de verzorgingssituatie van kinderen. De resultaten lieten zien dat kinderen van gedetineerde moeders gemiddeld gezien elke drie jaar met een nieuwe primaire verzorger te maken kregen. Ook verhuisden ze om de twee jaar, wat zes keer zo hoog is als het nationale gemiddelde. Voor veel kinderen vonden zulke wisselingen al regelmatig plaats voorafgaand aan de detentie van moeder. Echter, de detentie was doorgaans de start van een toename aan wisselingen van verzorgers, nog bovenop de wisselingen die het directe gevolg waren van het wegvallen van moeder als dagelijks verzorger. Daarmee kan worden geconcludeerd dat, hoewel causaliteit niet kan worden getest, er een verband is tussen detentie van moeder en een toename van instabiliteit in de verzorgingssituatie.

Coparenting

Een hoge kwaliteit van coparenting interactie, dat wil zeggen een interactie die wordt gekenmerkt door wederzijdse steun en solidariteit tussen verzorgers, wordt gezien als een belangrijke factor in het psychosociaal functioneren van kinderen. Idealiter zou de coparenting relatie niet alleen van hoge kwaliteit moeten zijn als er een directe interactie is (wanneer moeder, verzorger en kind alle drie aanwezig zijn) maar ook wanneer de interactie indirect is (wanneer moeder en kind samen zijn in afwezigheid van de andere verzorger).

De studie in hoofdstuk 5 liet zien dat gedetineerde moeders kwalitatief minder goed coparenting gedrag vertonen dan veroordeelde moeders die niet in de gevangenis zitten.

Ook liet de studie zien dat detentie de mogelijkheden van gedetineerde moeders tot coparenting interactie beperkt. Gedetineerde moeders ervaren minder interacties met de andere verzorgers dan veroordeelde moeders die niet in de gevangenis zitten. Opvallend is dat voor één op de vier kinderen bleek dat de gedetineerde moeder geen enkele vorm van coparenting interactie ervaart met de huidige verzorger van de kinderen. Coparenting interactie werd daarnaast ook beperkt door het feit dat, in de meeste gevallen, de moeders alleen een indirecte interactie coparenting ervaren

en kinderen dus geen situaties meemaken waarin zij in aanwezigheid zijn van zowel moeder als verzorger. Deze bevinding is van belang omdat de studie ook uitwees dat de kwaliteit van het coparenting gedrag van de moeders positief samenhangt met de mate waarin moeders volwaardige (dus zowel directe als indirecte) coparenting interacties ervaren.

Voorgaand onderzoek werd beperkt doordat vrijwel alleen coparenting relaties tussen gedetineerde moeders en grootmoeders werden onderzocht. Echter, grootmoeders waren vaak al voorafgaand aan de detentie van moeder betrokken bij de opvoeding van de kinderen. Coparenting tussen moeders en grootmoeders verschilt mogelijk van coparenting tussen moeders en andere typen verzorgers vanwege de al bestaande affectieve en familiale banden tussen de moeders en de grootmoeders. Dit proefschrift toont aan dat coparenting interacties veel diffuser en diverser zijn wanneer een meer representatieve groep van verzorgers in onderzoek wordt betrokken.

Implicaties voor beleid en praktijk

Een aantal bevindingen zijn van belang voor beleid en praktijk. Dit proefschrift liet zien dat kinderen van gedetineerde moeders een kwetsbare groep vormen. Een deel van de problemen lijkt gerelateerd aan de detentie van moeder. Zoals ook elders is betoogd (De Ruyter, Hissel, & Bijleveld, 2013) zou, vanuit het oogpunt van het welbevinden van de kinderen, opsluiting van moeders enkel moeten worden gebruikt als een *ultimissimum remedium*. Door moeders alternatieve straffen op te leggen, is mogelijk te voorkomen dat kinderen hun moeders moeten missen. Dit gemis werd door (met name de jongere) kinderen benoemd als een van de meest ernstige problemen die zij ervaren. Bovendien zou het bepaalde vormen van sociale problematiek, zoals zich eenzaam voelen of het gevoel gestigmatiseerd te worden vanwege detentie van moeder, kunnen voorkomen. Het behoedt kinderen ook voor het moeten bezoeken van gevangenis, wat vaak een sterke indruk op hen maakte of zelfs als intimiderend werd ervaren.

Indien moeders wel worden gedetineerd, zouden de belangen van de kinderen een leidend principe moeten zijn in de wijze waarop die straf wordt uitgevoerd. Het plaatsen van moeders in een gevangenis die geografisch gezien zo dicht mogelijk bij de woonplek van hun kinderen ligt, is hier een voorbeeld van. Bij het organiseren van contact- en bezoekmogelijkheden, zou de dagelijkse routine van de kinderen in aanmerking moeten worden genomen. Bijvoorbeeld door kinderen de gelegenheid te geven om telefonisch contact te hebben met hun moeders op belangrijke momenten gedurende de dag, zoals direct na school of voor het slapen gaan. Weekendbezoek betekent dat kinderen hun moeders niet hoeven te bezoeken tijdens schooltijd.

Bezoekruimten moeten zo worden ingericht dat moeders en kinderen op een zo normaal mogelijke manier contact kunnen hebben.

De moeder-kinddagen zijn een goed voorbeeld van kindgericht beleid, dat kan helpen voorkomen dat kinderen extra schade oplopen als gevolg van de strafoplegging van hun moeder. Tijdens deze dagen kunnen moeders en kinderen knuffelen, spelletjes spelen en gewoon tijd samen doorbrengen. Dergelijk beleid moet niet iets extra's zijn en een goede uitvoering moet niet afhankelijk zijn van de inspanningen van vrijwilligers en toegewijd gevangenispersoneel, maar moet door de overheid – die verantwoordelijk is voor de uitvoering van straffen- worden aangeboden als een integraal onderdeel van het gevangenisbeleid.

Dit proefschrift laat zien dat problemen in de verzorgingssituatie in sommige families al vóór de detentieperiode plaatsvonden. Dus, hoewel contact van moeders met het strafrechtelijk systeem aan de ene kant kan worden gezien als een risicofactor, kan het ook worden gezien als een kans om verandering te bewerkstelligen: de detentieperiode kan een unieke mogelijkheid zijn voor het aanbieden van interventies aan moeders en hun gezinnen. De oudertraining 'Betere Start' is zo'n interventie.

Een kwalitatief goede interactie tussen moeders en verzorgers, in de aanwezigheid van kinderen, wordt verondersteld een belangrijke factor te zijn in het psychosociaal functioneren van kinderen. Dit proefschrift laat echter zien dat er nauwelijks mogelijkheid is voor moeders om met de dagelijkse verzorgers over de opvoeding van de kinderen te communiceren. Afgezien van de schaarse mogelijkheden tot familiebezoek zonder supervisie, zijn verzorgers en kinderen beperkt tot de reguliere bezoeken om gezamenlijk moeder te bezoeken. Deze bezoeken zijn over het algemeen beperkt in tijd en vinden plaats in grootschalige bezoekruimten met weinig privacy. Kinderen en verzorgers zijn middels een zogenoemde 'slang'-opstelling van tafels fysiek gescheiden van de moeders. Regels en beleid zouden zodanig moeten worden aangepast dat de betrokkenheid van moeders bij de opvoeding van hun kinderen beter wordt gefaciliteerd. Daartoe zullen programma's moeten worden ontwikkeld waarin specifiek aandacht is voor het betrekken van de verzorger bij het bezoek. Bezoekmogelijkheden gericht op het 'gezin' van moeder, verzorger en kind, zijn noodzakelijk.

Conclusie

Kinderen van gedetineerde moeders vormen een kwetsbare groep met een verscheidenheid aan problematiek. Vaker wel dan niet impliceert de detentie van moeder dat er (toenemende) instabiliteit ontstaat in de verzorgingssituatie van de kinderen, zoals wisselingen in primaire verzorgers, verhuizingen en daarmee mogelijk ook verandering van scholen, clubs en vrienden. Gedetineerde moeders hebben zeer

weinig gelegenheid om een coparenting relatie te onderhouden met de verzorgers van hun kinderen. Er werd een duidelijk verband aangetoond tussen de detentie van moeder en sociale problematiek bij kinderen. Internaliserend en externaliserend probleemgedrag werd vooral aangetroffen bij oudere kinderen. Dit kan worden geplaatst in een bredere ontwikkelingspsychologische context, en veronderstelt dat ook andere factoren dan detentie de problematiek (mede) kunnen verklaren. Meer onderzoek is nodig naar de mechanismen die negatieve uitkomsten bij de kinderen veroorzaken en naar de interventies die het meest effectief zijn om de kinderen te helpen. Het welbevinden van de kinderen en het bevorderen van mogelijkheden voor gedetineerde moeders om deel te nemen aan de opvoeding van hun kinderen, verdienen een centrale plek in gevangenisbeleid.

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Curriculum vitae

Sanne Hissel (21-01-1981) studied Psychology at VU University Amsterdam. In 2005 she graduated with a specialization in Clinical Psychology and obtained a certificate in Psychodiagnostic assessment. For the next three years she worked as a researcher at the commercial research company Regioplan Policy Research (a subsidiary of Ernst & Young). In 2009 she became a lecturer and researcher in the department of Criminal Law and Criminology of the Faculty of Law at VU University Amsterdam. In August 2009 she started her PhD research at the Phoolan Devi Institute, a collaboration between VU University and the Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement (NSCR). As of May 2014 she works as a postdoctoral researcher at the NSCR.

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